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# RANCH ROMANCES

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Now 148 Pages

THIRD SEPTEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

## THE HORSE EXTERMINATORS
by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

•

## CANYON BLOCKADE
by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

•

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Address.....

Age.....

Town..... State.....

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DEPT. MA-46
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28th Year
OF PUBLICATION

THIRD
SEPTEMBER NUMBER

September 26, 1952
Volume 174, No. 2

# RANCH ROMANCES

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ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY


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FANNY ELLSWORTH
*Editor*

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### Fine Letter Writer

Dear Editor:

I live on a "to be" ranch, 18 miles out of town, so I love to write to people. I read your wonderful RANCH ROMANCES and decided to see if I could join OUR AIR MAIL. I am 5'4½" tall, 108 lbs., and will be 17 in July. I have dark brown hair and dark blue eyes. I love all kinds of animals, especially dogs and horses. My hobbies are riding horses, writing letters, collecting miniature horses, and story book dolls. I love dancing, western preferred. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

BARBARA JEAN HILL

Route 4
Orofino, Idaho

---

### Distress Signal

Dear Editor:

I am a radioman in the U.S. Navy and I am now stationed in Sasebo, Japan, and I will be here for a year and a half before I get to return to the States. When a fellow is this far away from home it is really a treat to receive letters from the States. I would like especially to hear from girls as there are no American women over here. Of course, I will answer all letters I receive and I hope that girls from other countries will also write. I am 18 years old, 6'1" tall, light brown hair, blue eyes. I like almost any type of sports. My home is in Birmingham, Alabama. I would also like to exchange snaps. If you have any questions about Japan, well fire away, and I will try to answer them.

W. G. WALKER, RMSN

Navy 3912 Box 44
c/o FPO
San Francisco, Calif.

---

### Full Mail Box Wanted

Dear Editor:

I love horses and outdoor life, but I am unable to get out and enjoy riding as I used to. I am 32 years old, weigh 135 pounds, stand 5'4". My main hobby now is reading RANCH ROMANCES because it brings back memories. I would enjoy letters from anyone anywhere and will answer all I receive. So please write to me if you sincerely want a pen pal. I have some interesting things to write about, so let's give the postmaster some extra work here.

EVELYN ALBERSON

General Delivery
Burbank, Missouri

---

### The Eyes Of Texas

Dear Editor:

We are two gals from southeast Texas and this is our first time try for pen pals, so please print our pleas for pen pals in RANCH ROMANCES. Faye is 5'½" tall, weighs 92 lbs. She has blonde hair and blue eyes and is 14 years old. Vivian is 5'5" tall and weighs 112 lbs. She has dishwater blonde hair and blue eyes and is 14 years old also. She loves to ride horses and swim. We both love to read and we enjoy good clean parties. We promise to answer all letters from boys and girls from 14 to 19 years of age. We would love to hear especially from girls who have lost their mothers and now have a happy home.

VIVIAN and FAYE

Vivian Morse
P.O. Box 313
Honey Island, Texas

Faye Hilderbrand
P.O. Box 306
Honey Island, Texas

**EDITOR'S NOTE: For 27 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.**

**Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

---

### Across The Wide Pacific

Dear Editor:

I am a boy who lives in Japan, attending High School at Kodama. I am 15 years old, 5'5" tall, and weigh 107 pounds. I would like to hear from boys and girls around my own age. My hobbies are letter writing, stamp collecting and music.

KANJI GOHDA

200 Moto-Machi, Kodama-Machi
Kodamagun, Saitama-Pref., Japan

---

### Heart To Get

Dear Editor:

I am a farm girl living in Iowa. This is my third attempt to get into the OUR AIR MAIL column—I hope I make the grade this time. I am five foot tall, have dark hair and blue eyes. I am 26 years old. Will exchange snapshots. Won't someone have a heart and fill my mailbox?

LUCILLE GRISHAM

Route #2
Lisbon, Iowa

### An Injection Of Ink

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt in 3 years to ask you to grant me the favor of printing a pen pal request in one of the OUR AIR MAIL columns. I am a regular reader of your magazine, which is a swell book, and to my ideas, a magazine worth reading and in which one gets his full money's worth of reading pleasure. Having met several Americans in my profession as a nurse, I have grown to care for them immensely, and it is my one ambition that one day I shall be able to settle down in the United States. I would appreciate it very much if you could make it possible to have my pen pal plea printed in your next issue. My age is 45 years—a brunette—5'5" tall, and inclined to be plump. I am a French Brazilian nurse, well-traveled and broadminded. Ladies and gentlemen of all ages are invited to write.

(Miss) ROCHELLE RICHARDS
BM/CVXT
3, Bloomsbury Street
London, W. C. 1, England

---

### Twinkling Gal

Dear Editor:

I am a (nearly) 16 year old Junior in high school. I stand 5'5" and have brown eyes that have a twinkle in them, and shoulder-length brown hair. I love to ride horses, swim, roller skate, and read. I also like to write and receive letters and will gladly answer all I receive.

BILLIE SUE NORTON
Box 355
Dilley, Texas

---

### Tempting Farmer-ette

Dear Editor:

RANCH ROMANCES is my favorite magazine. I'm 5'2", weigh 126 lbs.; my eyes are blue, and my hair is black. I would love to hear from young men around the ages of 17-21. I like many sports. My hobby is farming. I am a tempting gal of 16. My name is

BETTY L. DAVIS
Route 1, Box 114
Caruthers, Calif.

---

### Our Far-Flung Sailors

Dear Editor:

Am writing this in hopes that you will enter it in your magazine so that I might get some mail, as at present that is something that I get very little of. I am 6' tall, have brown hair, weigh 165 lbs., have a ruddy complexion—at least that's what it says on my I.D. card. Some of the things I am interested in are dancing, riding, writing and most all sports. Would like to hear from anyone of all ages. I can promise an answer to all letters as there are 55 other fellows in my division who would like to have someone to correspond with. They hail from California, Colorado, Ohio, the New England states. I myself come from Jersey.

FRANK W. HAMBOR
Rd 2 "K" Div.
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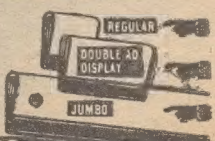


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The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* accident, and for *all* common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

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For Hospital Bills, up to . . . . . $500.00
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For Orthopedic Appliances, up to . . . . $500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

# 3¢ A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
## for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

### This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

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**REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!**

**FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON**
The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

**The Service Life Insurance Company**
**Hospital Department H-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska**
Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

*Name*.....

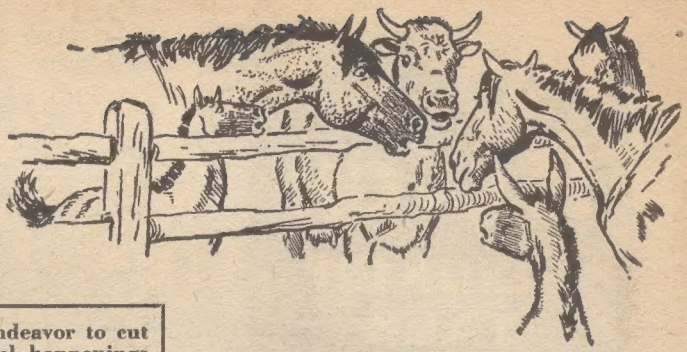
*Address*.....

*City or Town*.....*State*.....

THE SERVICE LIFE FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

## SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
**Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951**
**Hospital Department H-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska**

# TRAIL DUST



**THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—Twentieth Century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.**

LOS ANGELES, Calif., boasts a Shepherd dog who's been through a lawsuit and won. He was taken to court and sued for $25, for damages to Patsy, the spaniel he bit. Other canines will be happy to know the verdict: "Any dog should be entitled to bite another dog once," said the judge. But things will be different in the future, the judge added. The second bite is something else again.

**ONE WESTERN town had such a prolonged rainfall that even the ducks took to the hills. Observers spotted one mother duck marshaling 17 ducklings and quickly moving them to higher ground.**

NOTHING COULD stop this South Dakota man from getting to his destination at the Yellowstone Hotel in Hettingger, N. D. Even when his truck went off the road and smashed into something—he found he'd crashed right into the front door of the Yellowstone Hotel.

**DOWN IN GARLAND, Tex., one restaurateur had practically no business after thieves stole 50 pounds of potatoes. Reason: The specialty of the house is the potato dinner.**

SEEMS LIKE there's trouble every time a father tries to show off for his offspring. This Oregon father couldn't resist when he saw his little son jumping over the lawn sprinkler. "Watch this," were Dad's famous words as he leapt toward the sprinkler, caught himself on the clothesline and knocked himself out. He came to, hearing his little boy's delighted words: "Do it again, Daddy!"

**THERE'S ALWAYS someone who takes orders literally. This time it's a café owner, who, when told to post his ceiling prices, posted them—on the ceiling.**

WALKING TO work, this Canadian saw a lot of smoke coming from a house, and had himself a real busman's holiday. He went right in, woke up and saved the occupants, notified the fire department, and then calmly went on downtown to his job —as fireman.

**AND IN DENVER, Colo., another man discovered a big fire. He knocked on the door, saw the smoke pouring out, ran for help and saved the day. Later, when he had time to think about it, he was the most amazed person. Seems he's a fire inspector. He'd just stopped at that house on a routine fire check.**

UP IN WENATCHEE, Wash., the postmaster received an unusual package addressed to "Some poor orphan in Europe." Inside, in a child's handwriting, was the explanation that he'd been told not to waste food because of all the children who had none. Also included was a partly eaten baked potato.

# RANCH FLICKER TALK

## Son of Paleface

***PARAMOUNT features Russell, Hope and Rogers. Need we say more?***

IF YOU love the Wild West so much that you don't want to laugh at it, stay away from *Son of Paleface,* which takes a broad poke at horse operas and is one of the funniest pictures ever made.

You remember the original Paleface Potter, whose impact on the West a couple of years ago was as disrupting as Jesse James and Wild Bill Hickok combined? Well, Potter, Jr., (the spit 'n' image of his Dad, courtesy of the unique physiognomy of Bob Hope) has an equally shattering effect. Potter, Sr., arrived by prairie schooner; Potter, Jr. travels by Ford with just as devastating results.

Jane Russell is back in the sequel, but Roy Rogers and Trigger have been added to the cast—and if those two can laugh at horse opera, you can too.

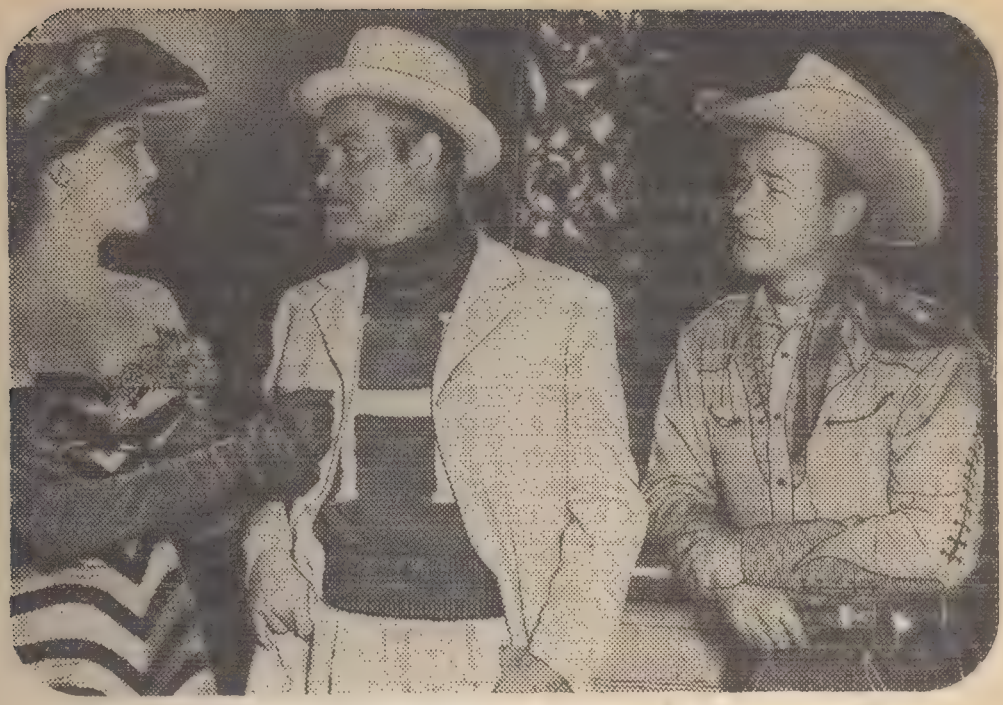
Bob plays a Harvard grad who goes to the Wild West seeking the fortune of his father, who is now, alas, the late Mr. Potter. Jane is the sultry menace who leads a bandit gang, and Roy opposes her as a stalwart government agent.

In between their hilarious adventures, the three find time to sing half a dozen songs, including a new version of the old *Paleface* hit, *Buttons and Bows.* Roy provides a tender and moving moment when he sings *Four-Legged Friend* to Trigger. Our favorite melody, though, is *What a Dirty Shame,* dedicated to the saloon of the same name.

The Dirty Shame is one of 27 buildings constructed on the Paramount back lot to form the Western town of Sawbuck Pass. Like all up-and-coming towns it also boasts a bank, blacksmith shop, general store, livery stable, millinery shop and two hotels. It was very expensive to build, but it wasn't torn down when *Son of Paleface* was finished. It will be a permanent set, and you'll see it dozens of times more in future Paramount Westerns, though you may never recognize it.

Besides this extensive exterior scenery,

***Bob Hope and Jane Russell***



***The three hilarious stars—Jane Russell, Bob Hope and Roy Rogers***

31 interior sets were also built, all within Paramount's walls. This movie was the first one Roy Rogers ever made without going on location.

Paramount technicians also had to build a drawbridge to the bandits' hide-out and a bed for Bob and Trigger to share, which cost $850 and measures 12 feet by 15.

One of their biggest jobs was reconstruction of a 1900 Ford. This cost $5,000, even though the studio already owned the Ford. It had to be rebuilt with three engines and two transmissions, so it could accomplish miracles never before required of four wheels, including rearing on its hind ones, à la Trigger.

The script also called for a large wooden bath tub. The property department saved the carpenters some trouble by turning up the very thing needed, which had been left over from a Cecil B. DeMille epic. Now the tub has the unique distinction of having held Paulette Goddard and Jane Russell, with Bob Hope thrown in for laughs.

The Technicolor used in filming *Son of Paleface* would be worth while just to show off Jane's eye-opening costumes. There are 15 of them, everything from dance hall outfits to riding clothes. Her most glamorous costume is a satin ball gown embroidered, it says here, in diamonds. Her most sensational is a black satin corset, which is nothing like what grandma used to wear.

Roy's wardrobe can't compare with Jane's of course, but it's about as spectacular as a man's can get. He's dashingly dressed in the flashy cowboy outfits for which he's famous, and Trigger has three changes of saddle, including one that's insured for $50,000.

Bob's clothes are appropriately outlandish, and everything, right down to his long red underwear, is marked with a large "H" for Harvard.

If you didn't see *Paleface,* here's your chance to make up for some fun you missed. If you did see *Paleface,* you probably haven't read this far. You're out right now buying your ticket for *Son of Paleface.*

***BETH BRIGHT***

# JEFF CHANDLER
## From Oilpaint to Greasepaint

RANCH FLICKER TALK

JEFF CHANDLER went to art school because he wanted to be an actor, and he admits he took a roundabout way.

"It sounds foolish when I think back on it," he says with a grin, "but it seemed very sensible at the time. You see, tuition to dramatic school was $500, but I could get into art school for $200, so I thought I'd learn to be an artist and thus earn enough money to learn to be an actor."

What's more, his system worked out fine, though not exactly as he'd planned it. After completing his art course, he was proficient enough to be given a job as an instructor. Then he got a scholarship at the Feagin School of Dramatic Art.

"Of course," Jeff admits, "there is the possibility that I'd have gotten the same dramatic scholarship if I'd asked for it in the first place, so I don't advise aspiring actors to go first to art school."

Jeff was born Ira Grossel in Brooklyn 34 years ago. He always wanted to be an actor, but he never got a chance even to appear in school plays because he had to help out in his mother's candy store every afternoon.

After dramatic school he worked in summer stock for a couple of seasons and then opened his own year-round company in Elgin, Ill. The venture had just about become a paying proposition when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor, and Jeff immediately abandoned greasepaint in favor of khaki. Almost exactly four years later, Jeff was discharged, having spent most of his service years on the Aleutian Islands.

"There was one good thing about the Aleutians," says Jeff, "you couldn't spend any money. So I had $3,000 when I got out of the Army. I blew a thousand of it on a wardrobe which I thought would become a rising young actor, and lived on the rest until I could get a job."

It took six months for Jeff to get his name on a pay check, and that was for a small radio part. The jobs kept coming, though, and finally Jeff got the permanent plum of Eve Arden's boyfriend, Mr. Boynton, on the CBS *Our Miss Brooks* program.

Now that Jeff is a movie star he still plays Mr. Boynton. No matter what swashbuckling parts he plays in front of the cameras during the week, he's still the meek biology teacher on Sunday night.

On the screen he's the opposite of mild and meek, which is more appropriate for a fellow who's 6 feet 4 and weighs 210. Until recently he hasn't had many worries about type casting, but now he claims he's in danger of becoming the most narrowly typed actor in Hollywood.

"Those fellows who only play drunks, or only play policemen—they've got a wide field compared to me," says Jeff. "Pretty soon it will get to the point where people say, 'You know Jeff Chandler, the actor who plays Cochise, the Apache Indian Chief.'"

Jeff actually has played the character twice in two movies made by different studios, *Broken Arrow* for 20th Century-Fox and *Battle at Apache Pass* for Universal-International to whom Jeff is under contract.

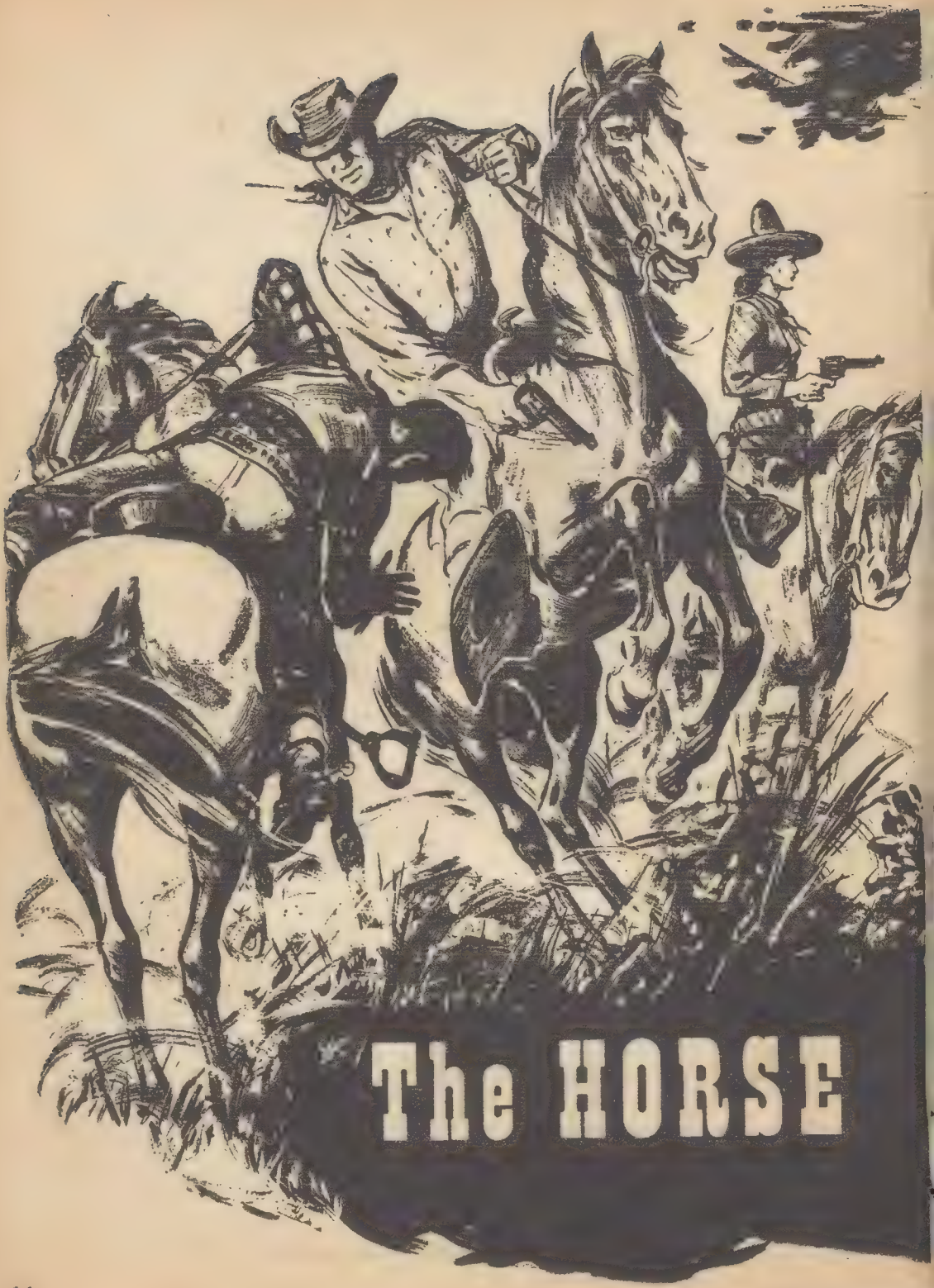
He's married to a girl he met while playing in stock, and Marjorie Chandler has given up her own career for the job of looking after their two daughters.

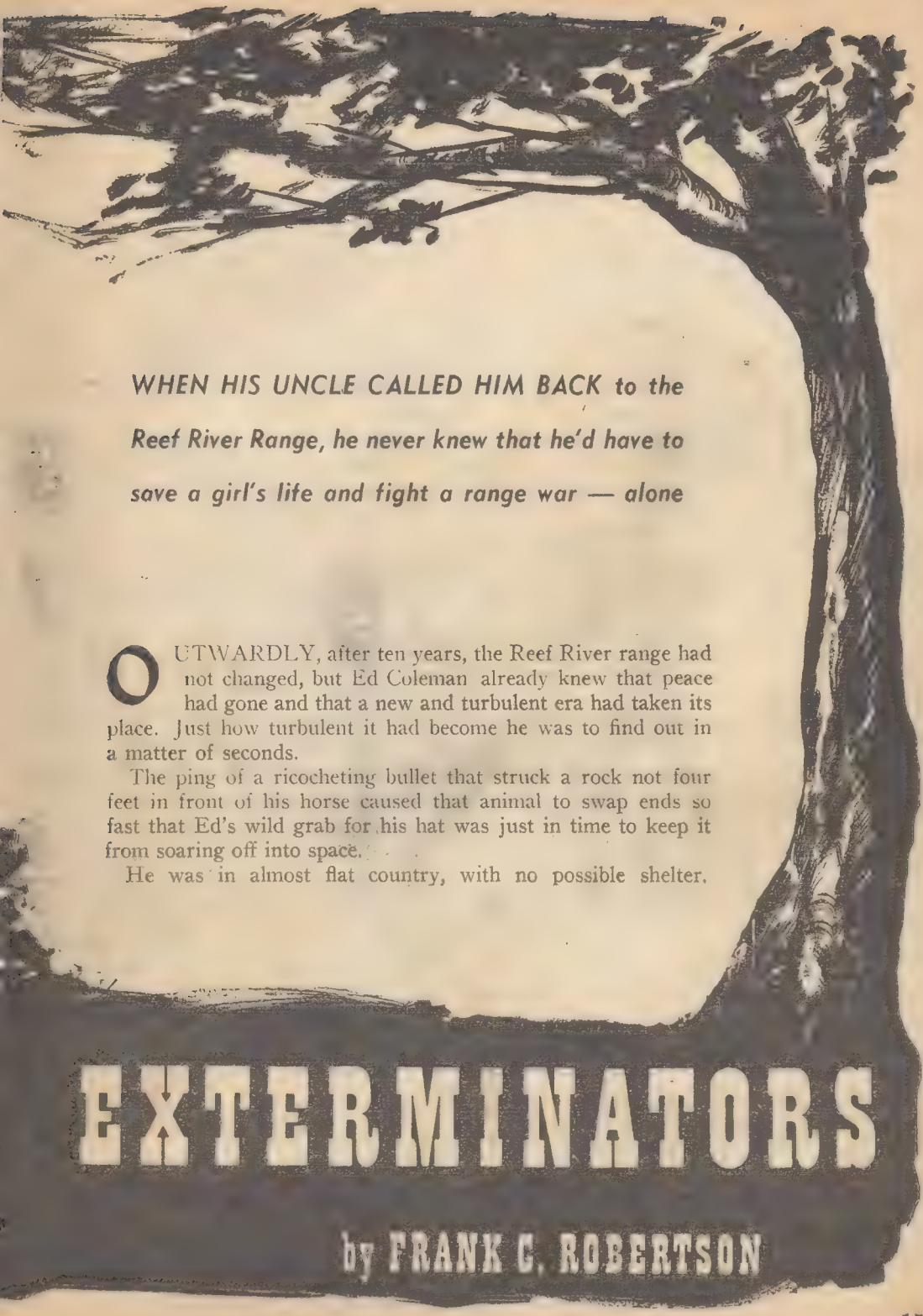
Aside from his wish to play every sort of character, Jeff has only one special ambition, and that's to make a baseball picture.

"It's really a suppressed desire," he admits. "If I hadn't been an actor, I wanted to be a big league ball player. So now I'm trying to have my cake and eat it too."

Universal

*Jeff Chandler—in the rôle he's getting famous for*


The HORSE



# EXTERMINATORS

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

*WHEN HIS UNCLE CALLED HIM BACK to the Reef River Range, he never knew that he'd have to save a girl's life and fight a range war — alone*

OUTWARDLY, after ten years, the Reef River range had not changed, but Ed Coleman already knew that peace had gone and that a new and turbulent era had taken its place. Just how turbulent it had become he was to find out in a matter of seconds.

The ping of a ricocheting bullet that struck a rock not four feet in front of his horse caused that animal to swap ends so fast that Ed's wild grab for his hat was just in time to keep it from soaring off into space.

He was in almost flat country, with no possible shelter.

Running would do him no good. He brought his startled horse to a stop and looked around.

He presented a beautiful target, and knew it, but a marksman who could hit that rock right on the nose could have picked him off just as easily. He concluded that the shot had been fired as a warning, and he knew why. He had been riding straight toward a herd of sheep which had been spread out fanwise in grazing formation.

His guess was right. There were no more shots. He couldn't see who had shot at him, and he didn't try to investigate. He rode away at a sharp right angle.

Sheep! He had always hated them, although he had never been much around them, but it was sheep, partly, that had brought him back to this range. A tall, well set up man with a long, leathery face, he sat his saddle with the ease achieved only by a man who had spent many years on a horse.

He had had the history of the present sheep invasion from his half-blind old uncle, Bill Leeds, the night before. When litigation had broken up the Cross Anchor, the dominant cow outfit here, a big sheep outfit had moved in and the little fellows were in a panic. Most of them had moved out or sold out because sheep and cattle could not use the same range.

It had been a little different with horsemen, and Bill Leeds raised horses rather than cattle. His horses still could graze the same land with sheep, provided the sheepmen would let them.

There was the rub. Leeds's horses were being killed or stolen, and the old man had written for his nephew to come to his rescue. Now Ed hadn't been on the range four hours before he was being shot at. He didn't like it.

He loped across a half mile flat and gained the top of a ridge. Three horsemen appeared before him, and they waited for him to come up. He recognized the Ferry brothers, Mont and Pat, at once. The two

cattlemen were old-time acquaintances of his. He didn't exactly classify them as friends, for he had never liked them too well.

Mont was about his own age and size, and rather good looking. Pat was much smaller, extremely slim, and about as ugly as a man could be. There was as much difference in their dispositions.

Ed's gaze flickered from them to the third person, who he was surprised to see was a girl—a very pretty girl with big blue eyes, russet hair and an enchanting grin. Her clothes were so loud that if it hadn't been for her red hair he would have thought her a Mexican. She was dressed like one.

She wore tight-fitting black velvet riding breeches with bell-bottoms, a pink shirt half covered with a short jacket embroidered with beads which emphasized the rather unfeminine breadth of her shoulders and the slenderness of her waist. The silk muffler around her neck was fastened by a carved bone holder, and there was a rattlesnake hatband around her tall, black sombrero. Her smile seemed to be one of recognition, but he didn't remember her.

MONT FERRY waved a greeting, and when Ed joined them he reached out to shake hands. "Well, if it ain't Ed Coleman," he said. "Say, was it you that baa-baa was shooting at a while ago?"

"It wasn't my shadow," Ed said.

"That's funny," Mont said. "I thought you horse jinglers and wool wranglers were eating out of the same trough."

Ed remembered now why he had always disliked Mont Ferry. The fellow was always needling somebody. Pat had only nodded and showed no inclination to shake hands. Ed looked at the girl, thinking he should know her, but couldn't place her.

Mont said, "Say, why ain't you two speaking to each other? The way Rags is always talking about you, you'd think there wasn't another man on earth."

"Rags Ragner!" Ed exclaimed in sheer amazement. "It can't be!"

"But it is." The girl smiled, her eyes lighting up with mischief. "I knew you at once."

She extended a shapely brown hand which Ed held a little longer than was necessary. Funny that he hadn't remembered her, for only last night Uncle Bill had warned him against her with bitter profanity. Her two brothers, Dewey and Hunt, were now in the penitentiary convicted of horse thievery, and Bill noisily declared that Rags ought to be with them.

Ed was a silent man by nature, and now he found himself completely at a loss for words. When he had left the country she had been about twelve or thirteen, a long-legged, dirty-faced little girl, dressed in the kind of clothes that had given her the nickname that had stayed with her. But even then, he recalled, she could stick to a horse like a spirit, and she had been his particular pet.

"Reckon you couldn't tell her without Hunt's cast-off rags a-whipping in the breeze," Mont remarked with a laugh.

Rags didn't take offense. Instead, her smile broadened.

"We can still wear each other's clothes," she said, "but now we're all three the same size, and I don't have to wait for the boys to outgrow 'em. First one up is the best one dressed. Or was—" her voice faltered a little—"until lately."

"She means since Dewey and Hunt went over the road," Pat said brutally.

"Sorry to hear about that," Ed said.

"They were no more guilty than I am," Rags declared vehemently.

Mont Ferry grinned. "That's what everybody says," he stated.

For the first time a trace of anger showed on the girl's face, but Pat Ferry said then, "Then woollies are heading this way. If you don't want to get bombarded again, you'd beter start backing up."

"We're not running from any sheep, and this rifle is hurting my leg," Rags declared.

Before anyone could interfere she leaped to the ground, pulled a rifle from the boot and dropped a bullet right in front of the startled sheep. In half a minute the entire herd had reversed direction, but Rags didn't get to see it.

HER HORSE, evidently a half-broken bronco, gave a tremendous leap, and since the girl had wrapped the reins around her wrist she was spun around and jerked over backwards.

The bronco bounded away as Rags got to her feet, but once more she was sent rolling like a hoop, leaving her tall black hat on the ground. She had to release the reins, and her mount went tearing through the brush behind the ridge.

Ed heard the whine of an answering bullet and the distant report of a rifle, indicating that the herder was not refusing any challenge. The Ferry brothers already were spurring down the ridge, and Ed joined them. He caught sight of Rags where she had scrambled behind an anthill, and she waved a reassuring arm.

Next moment she was running after them as a rifle bullet struck the anthill and showered her with gravel. Ed and Mont pulled up while Pat went in pursuit of her horse.

Her smile was a trifle insecure. There was a trickle of blood on her cheek and a bruise over her right eye. One wrist was rasped and burned from violent contact with the hackamore reins.

"You raised hell, didn't you?" Ed said, half angry and half amused. "I suppose you poke a stick into every hornet's nest you find."

"I throw rocks at them, but I never stirred up anything like this before," she confessed ruefully. "I guess I forgot what horse I was riding."

"And what sheepherder you was shooting at," Mont said. "That's Hansen."

She laughed. "He's sure a mean one."

"I could have explained his disposition, but I guess he done it better," Ed commented ironically. He liked the way she accepted her discomfiture.

Pat now had returned with Rags's horse, but they found that her hat and rifle were back on top of the ridge.

"Why don't you be a gentleman and go git 'em for her, Ed?" Mont said jeeringly.

"Why not?" Ed accepted the challenge, and walked back on the ridge.

He saw now that the herder had been joined by two men on horseback. There was a tingle along his spine, and a queasy emptiness in his stomach. It took nerve to walk out within range of that rifleman, but he kept going. He had seen enough of the herder's shooting to know that the man could blast him down if he wanted to, and the man's patience might be wearing a little thin.

Ed saw the herder step out away from the others and raise the rifle, but he restrained a wild impulse to run. He started to reach down to pick up Rag's hat, but jerked back when it gave a little jump. Suddenly there was a hole through the crown that had not been there before.

Ed held both hands high as a token of surrender and to show that he carried no rifle. Then he collected the hat and gun and returned to his companions.

"Oh," Rags quavered, "when I heard that shot and you didn't come running I was sure you had been killed."

"He didn't shoot at me, but he sent you a little souvenir," Ed said as he indicated the two holes that marked the passage of the bullet.

"He did that?" Instinctively Rags felt the bruise at the hairline above her eye.

"You weren't wearing it," Ed laughed. "You were busy turning handsprings and somersaults when you lost it."

AFTER the Ferry brothers had taken their departure, Ed turned back to the girl. "You riding my way?" he queried.

"Yes," Rags replied. "As a matter of fact I was going over to Uncle Bill's when I ran across Mont and Pat."

"You were?" Ed hesitated a little. "From what the old gentleman told me you're likely to get run off with a shotgun."

Rags's usual gaiety wasn't in evidence now. She said soberly, "I heard you were back, and I wanted to see if you couldn't talk some sense into the lovable stiff-necked old mule."

He had heard Bill Leeds's side of the story, now he wanted to hear what Rags had to say. "What's wrong, Rags?" he asked.

"Everything. Just plain everything. We sold a bunch of horses we'd gathered, twenty-three head to be exact. When they showed up in the corral the next morning six head of Uncle Bill's were there, and six head we had sold were gone. They sent Dewey and Hunt to the pen for three years on account of it. I'd have gone too, only my name didn't happen to be on the bill of sale."

"You think somebody substituted Bill's horses in the night?"

"I know they did."

"They tell me you and the boys brand quite a few horses these days."

"All right, we do. A lot of 'em are mavericks, but that's because we ride more than anybody else. We've branded a lot of Bill Leeds's colts, too—with his own brand. If it hadn't been for us he wouldn't have enough horses left to raise dust."

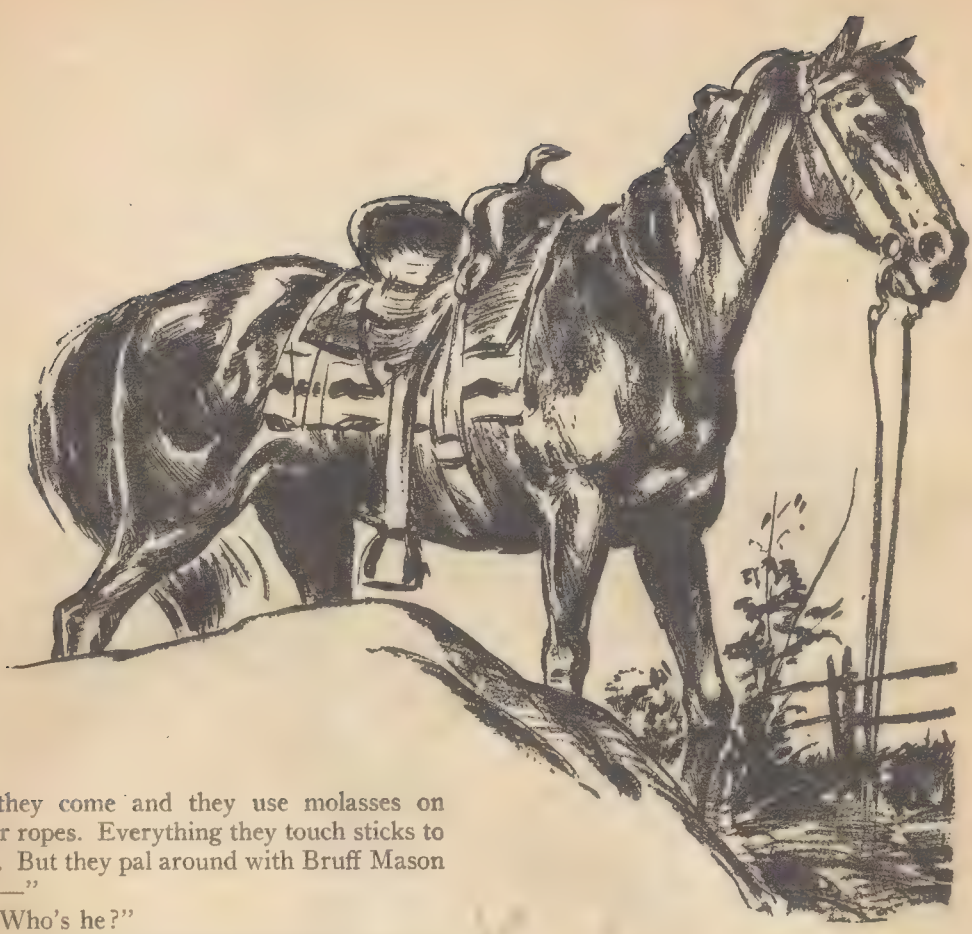
Ed believed her. He had known her and her two older brothers for years before he had left the country, and they had been square-shooting kids. Looking at her now he couldn't believe that she was a horse thief.

"Bill is pretty hard to convince," he said.

"I know. He used to like us, but since he's lost his eyesight he just sits there believing everything old man Buhler tells him," she said hotly.

"Where's Buhler come in? I always thought he was a harmless old gink."

"Maybe he is, but he's got a couple boys who ain't. Cash and Johnny are tough



as they come and they use molasses on their ropes. Everything they touch sticks to 'em. But they pal around with Bruff Mason and—"

"Who's he?"

"The new deputy sheriff, and he's hard as a pine knot. I hate him. Because Cash and Johnny are his friends he helped them frame the boys, I'm sure."

Ed wanted to get off the subject until he got to know Rags a little better.

"Look," he said, "how do the Ferrys stand in this sheep business? Seems to me they have more to lose than anybody, but they didn't seem much concerned."

"They're not." Rags's brows knitted into a frown. "They claim they've got their range sewed up between Rock Creek and Desolation Desert, and that sheep can't horn in there. What's more, they're even friendly with old A.P. Rice, the sheepman whose herder was shooting at us today. I think they're crazy."

"Then who is fighting the sheep?" Ed inquired.

RAGS GAVE him a queer, straight glance. "Nobody," she said. "They've bluffed out Jim Waverly and the other cowmen. All they've got to bust now is Bill Leeds and the Ragners. And they've got old Bill fighting us."

"I see. What have they done?"

"Mister, I can show you fifty dead horses on this range. I've heard it said that coyotes won't bother sheep if they can get horse meat."

Anger began to flow over Ed Coleman. A horse was a pretty defenseless animal against sheepherders as good with a rifle as the one he had encountered that afternoon.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Ed," Rags said earnestly. "This sheep outfit is tough.

*He knew that she wanted him to kiss her, but he wouldn't*

It's not only their herders who can shoot. They've got some extra gunmen."

"What the hell are Mont and Pat and the others thinking of?" he demanded. "If they can steal this range they won't stop here."

"That's what I wonder," she said. "Nobody ever accused them of being cowards, but they sure aren't mixing into this."

They began to talk of old times, and suddenly Ed remembered something. He said with a grin, "I guess I was the one who started you Ragners on your careers of crime. I helped you brand half a dozen mavericks one day."

"And later we found out that every one of 'em was highgraded from Uncle Bill."

"He knew it before they were branded," Ed said smiling.

He was thinking of the half-starved Ragner kids he had known. Their father, a broken-down college professor, had come out here for his health, which hadn't improved, and the family might have starved

had it not been for Bill Leeds and the three energetic kids themselves.

"That's what makes it so hard, Ed," she said. "Uncle Bill was so good to us, and now he claims we took advantage of his generosity and are stealing from him." There were tears on her eyelashes.

"He's a stubborn old coot," Ed admitted, "but I'll try to make him see the light. In his present mood I don't think it would be best for you to see him. Oh, I forgot. How are your folks?"

Rags looked straight at her bronco's ears as she replied, "They're dead. I'm living alone now."

"I'm sorry," he said, knowing how inadequate the words were.

"At least I'm thankful they went before the boys were sent to the penitentiary," she said. "The only thing I'm really interested in now is proving that they were not guilty."

He rode with her to the top of a hill overlooking a little cove far below, where nestled a small unpainted shack and a few corrals and outbuildings. This had been the home of the Ragner kids ever since he could remember. It was hard to think of a girl like Rags living there alone now. But her expensive saddle and clothes seemed to give the lie to any plea of poverty.

"What are you going to do, Ed?" she asked when they stopped.

"About those sheep? Well, the first thing is to have a talk with this A.P. Rice and find out where he stands."

"If you like;" she offered, "I'll go with you tomorrow. I know where his camp is."

"Fine," he said. "I'll meet you here in the morning."

WHEN RAGS said that Bill Leeds was as stubborn as a mule, she had not exaggerated. He had been slow to believe that the Ragner kids would steal from him, but having been shown what seemed to be positive evidence of their treachery, evidence on which the boys had been sent to the penitentiary, he had turned against them and wouldn't listen to his nephew's defense of them.

"Because I used to look the other way when they highgraded a colt they think I'm a gold mine," he declared angrily. "Buhler swears he knows they've been stealing from me for years."

"Does he know his own kids have, too?" Ed asked.

Bill Leeds looked startled. "They're wild, but they ain't never been sent to the pen," he defended. "They been doing a lot of my riding lately."

"All right," Ed said shortly. "But let's get one thing straight. I left here because you got too damned cantankerous to live with. You sent for me to come back, and I'm here. But if I stay I do the riding for the outfit, not the Buhlers. Is that clear?"

Old Bill started to blow up, thought better of it. "Mebbe I was to blame," he admitted reluctantly. "Anyway, you're the only kin I got. Go ahead, have it your way. It'll all be yours anyway when I die—if there's anything left."

"There won't be if that sheep outfit ain't stopped."

"If I had my eyesight I'd damn soon stop 'em," Bill said angrily. "Don't know what them damned Ferrys are thinking of."

"Their hides," Ed grumbled. . . .

Ed expected to have to wait for Rags the next morning, but she was there ahead of him.

"You wearing your bulletproof vest?" she queried airily.

"Danged thing must've rusted away," he said. "Couldn't find a trace of it. You look too good for anybody to shoot. If it wasn't for that red hair and the holes in your hat you'd look like the daughter of a Mexican grandee."

"You don't like it?"

"Of course I do. It sets you off. I just wondered how come is all."

"If you had to wear cast-off clothes all your life and been called Rags on account of it, you might understand. As soon as I was able I bought myself the loudest, most expensive duds I could find. You wouldn't understand either that I wear them instead of mourning for my parents. I—I think Dad would have liked it. But if you don't like my get-up—"

"Hold on," Ed protested, "I'm all for it. It's like a—a declaration of independence."

She gave him that broad, friendly smile. "You always did understand me," she said. "I'll have to go to town soon and order a new hat. It takes two weeks to get an order filled."

"Would you rather I didn't call you Rags?"

"If you call me anything else I'll murder you. I'm not one damned bit ashamed of what I was, or of what I am."

"That a girl," he said. "Shall we go?"

As they rode along she said, "Remember that old pet Spot horse of yours?"

"Never forget him. Easiest colt I ever broke, and the best horse I ever forked."

"He's still alive. I saw him the other day," Rags stated. "Bill feeds him hay and grain all winter, and he hasn't had a saddle on since you left. That's one reason I'm still fond of the old critter—Bill, I mean. He was fat as a butter-ball last time I saw him."

Ed lifted eyebrows. "Bill?" he queried.

"No, Spot, you dope. I know right where he runs. Maybe we can run onto him."

THEY PICKED their way carefully through the sheep herds, not wanting a repeat performance of yesterday. They were riding along when they heard a horse's whinny, but no horse was in sight. "That's funny," Rags said, "it sounded down this way."

They changed their course, and presently they saw a horse's head sticking up over the bank of the wash. It had a large blaze in its face.

"Why, that's him now," Ed said. "Wonder if he recognized me?"

A minute later they saw what was the matter. The old horse had been shot through the back, and his front feet were up over the edge of the bank. He was powerless to move his paralyzed hindquarters.

A bitter oath escaped Ed's lips. It would have gone hard with any sheepherder he happened to see then. Old Spot whinnied again, softly. Rags tried not to cry.

"Hold the horses," Ed said. "Get them back out of sight."

He dismounted and approached the old horse. He dropped to his knees and for a moment held the head of the old horse in his arms and made no effort to hold back the tears. He stood up presently, took careful aim, and centered the horse's brain with a shot. Slowly, old Spot's body sank back into the wash and he lay still.

They rode away without speaking.

Half an hour later they met two horsemen who didn't try to evade them. Ed recognized them instantly as the two men who had been with the warlike shepherd when the fellow had shot the holes through Rags's hat. While cowmen required a string of from six to twelve horses, most sheepmen were satisfied to do their riding on one.

"See what I mean?" Rags said. "The big one is called Montana. He's Rice's foreman. The little cuss is Midge Smith, and if I ever saw a professional gunman, he's it."

The men looked just as tough as Rags implied. Montana was smiling a loose-lipped grin, showing yellow teeth, but the face of Midge Smith was coldly expressionless.

IF IT AIN'T the she-hoss-thief," Montana greeted. "Who's your friend, lady? Kinda seems to me I've seen him before, with his hands in the air or something."

"You got a good memory, friend," Ed said before Rags could speak. "Maybe you can recall shooting an old spotted horse down here yesterday."

"No, can't say that I do," Montana replied. "It's funny the way them range horses keep running into bullets when the herders are only shooting harmlessly at coyotes."

"I saw one herder yesterday who could do better shooting than that," Ed said. "Look, for every dead horse I find on this range I intend to shoot twenty sheep, or one sheepherder. Don't matter much to me which it is."

He was talking to Montana, but a cor-

ner of his eye never left Midge Smith. He could see that the little gunman was itching to go into action.

"That wouldn't be wise, friend," Montana said dangerously. "So far our shooting at you has been friendly like. Let's keep it that way."

"Then kill no more horses."

"Don't let him bluff you, Montana," Midge Smith spoke up in a squeaky voice. "What he needs is for you to do some tramping on his carcass."

"By Godfrey, you're right," Montana bellowed. "Climb down, fella, and I'll—hey, lay off that gun!"

Ed wasn't going for his gun, although it was to him that the remark was directed—but Midget Smith was. The pattern was clear, but Ed was ready.

He spun his horse, and the cowpony knocked Smith's horse off balance. It delayed Midge's fast draw just enough for Ed to get an even break. His bullet gored Midge's forearm, and Midge missed, as Ed's horse continued its plunge.

Montana was going for his gun. Ed spun his horse the other way and his gun barrel knocked the big man from his saddle.

Midge hadn't lost his gun, but involuntarily the fellow grabbed his injured arm. When he thought about using the gun again he found Rags's gun practically pressing against his body.

"Drop it," she said crisply, "or I'll drop you." The fellow's gun dropped from his hand and hit the ground.

Ed descended to the ground and emptied the cartridges out of Montana's gun. He performed the same office for Midge. He waited until the big man sat up and moaned.

"Get on your horse and travel," he said. "Next time we won't be so gentle." He gave them time to wrap a handkerchief around Midge's bleeding arm, and he and Rags watched them ride away in the direction of Salvadore, and a doctor.

"Good shooting, mister," Rags said approvingly.

"You weren't so slow yourself," he told her. "I wouldn't ask for a better sidekick."

THE SHEEP headquarters' camp was easy to find. It was situated in one of the prettiest spots on the entire range, and was fixed up in a condition of near luxury. There was plenty of shade and cool sparkling water, and the green grass was thick as a Persian rug. There were half a dozen tents of various sizes, a sheep wagon or two, commissary rigs, and a brand new Spaulding buggy with yellow wheels.

Large pieces of canvas had been spread between the trees to form a couple of shady arbors, and under one of them sat a tall old man with white hair dictating correspondence to a young and beautiful woman with light yellow hair. Under the other, a gray-haired woman was painting at an easel. Three or four men were lounging about.

"That's old A.P. Rice himself," Rags said as they rode up. "That's his wife doing the painting. She's not a bad sort at all, but that honey-haired shepherdness, Mildred Baines, I can't stand. Mont Ferry has got a case on her."

"Do I detect an aroma of sour grapes?" Ed jeered.

"If you think I'd look twice at Mont Ferry—" Rags began hotly.

A sheep dog that came bounding out at them made a flying leap for her horse's nose and cut short the remark. Nobody was doing anything to restrain the dog so Ed swiftly took down his rope, shook out about six feet of it, and when the dog made another pass at Rags's pony he swung the rope hard, and the hondo struck the dog on top of the head. The canine went down, its legs became rigid and it lay still.

A.P. Rice came to his feet. He was rather a majestic looking old party as he advanced in towering wrath. "Look here," he said angrily, "you've killed that valuable dog."

"So what?" Ed retorted. "You think we're going to sit here and let it rip our horses' noses to pieces?"

"You'll pay for that animal," Rice thundered.

"All right, I'll pay for it, just as soon

as you fork over for all the horses your damned herders have killed," Ed shot back. "Or how would you like a crack of this hondo over your head?"

That brought Rice to a startled stop. "Miss Ragner, who is this person?" he wanted to know.

"So sorry I forgot my manners," Rags murmured sweetly. "Mr. Rice, let me present Ed Coleman. He's running the Leeds's horse outfit."

The two men glared at each other.

"Hello, Mrs. Rice," Rags called. The elderly lady in the paint-daubed smock smiled.

"And how are you, Miss Baines?" Rags asked in the same sweet tone. "I'm afraid you've been getting out in the sun too much lately. You seem to be peeling."

"At least a lady is able to get sunburned," Miss Baines retorted. "And also dress in a dignified manner."

Mildred Baines was a pretty girl of perhaps twenty-five, but her beauty left Ed cold as an icicle.

"You had business with me?" Rice queried.

"Considerable. I don't like horse killers, and I don't like being shot at," Ed replied.

"If you were shot at I imagine you were trying to molest my sheep. I've ordered my men not to stand for that."

"I sent a couple of 'em in to see a doctor a while ago," Ed said. "I'll tell you what I told them. For every dead horse I find on the range you'll find twenty dead sheep."

Rice's pale blue eyes bugged out. "You mean to say you shot two of my men?" he gasped.

"No, only one. I just cracked the other's dome with my gun barrel. Let's see, what did you say their names were, Rags?"

"The one you hit was Montana, and you shot Midge Smith," Rags said composedly.

BY THIS time they had the undivided attention of everyone there. Rice looked as if he had tried to swallow

[*Turn page*]

"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"
"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"
YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND
America's Favorite Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN
GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES EXCESS DANDRUFF
29¢
KREMER KELLER

a whole egg and it had stuck in his throat. He plainly had believed that Montana and Midge were invincible, and he was speechless.

"On the way over we found an old pet horse of mine that had been shot and left to die," Ed went on. "Maybe I can't stop you from stealing our range, but by God, I can stop you from killing horses."

Rice walked back to the arbor and seated himself across from Miss Baines. "Are you ready to resume, Mildred?" he asked.

"Quite ready, Mr. Rice," the girl said, "but it would be much more pleasant working if that—that tomboy and her friend were to take themselves elsewhere."

"Look, shepherdess, one more word and I'll climb down and pull that honey hair of yours," Rags said angrily.

"I have no intention of arguing with someone like you," Mildred Baines said coldly.

"And whatever gave you the idea that you are such a great lady?" Rags countered. "I can think of lots of things I'd rather be than handmaiden to a sheepman."

"Come on, Rags," Ed cut in, "no use wasting time here."

As they started away the dog Ed had hit suddenly got to its feet and took off to the brush as though pursued by a dozen coyotes.

"One of these days old A.P. Rice may be running just as fast," Ed predicted.

"Think we got a chance?" Rags asked.

"I don't know, but from now on I'm dedicating myself to the proposition of making his life miserable," Ed promised.

On the way back they came close to the sheep band whose herder Ed suspected of having shot old Spot. The sheep were spread out over a flat, and doubtlessly the herder was watching the sheep from the blunt end of a brushy ridge.

"He owes me twenty sheep," Ed said. "If they can shoot at coyotes that ain't there, so can I." He reached down and pulled a rifle from under the stirrup fender.

"Wait a minute," Rags said. "You keep him watching you while I slip down that ridge and get the drop on him. I don't think he's seen us yet."

"That'll be dangerous," Ed objected.

"So will your job. I'm in this with you up to my neck, but I promise to be careful." She rode away before he could think how to stop her.

At that it might work. He waited a while, then rode out in plain view and began to circle around the leaders of the herd at a safe distance from the end of the ridge.

Soon, as he expected, a spent bullet hit the ground perhaps fifty feet from him. He raised his rifle and took aim at a sheep some distance back of the leaders. The animal dropped. The herder aimed higher, and the bullet droned over Ed's head.

Had the dead sheep been at the front of the herd the whole band would now have been in retreat. As it was, a few moved away and resumed grazing. Ed loped on a ways as the herder fired again, then stopped suddenly and brought down another sheep. The herder's range was twice the distance Ed was shooting, but his next bullet was uncomfortably close. Ed veered away.

HE HEARD a revolver shot, and looking toward the ridge he saw the herder out in plain sight with his hands in the air. Behind him stood Rags.

Ed waved, rode a little closer to the herd and began firing systematically, carefully counting the sheep as they fell until there were twenty. Then he rode around to where Rags was guarding her prisoner, a very frightened young fellow with ragged whiskers.

"Did you see that coyote?" Ed asked. "I reckon I must have shot at him twenty times and still the critter got away. Mighty hard thing to hit."

"There wasn't no coyote," the herder said. "You killed a lot of my sheep."

"Sheer accident, just as it was when you killed that old spotted horse yesterday," Ed ground out. He saw by the fellow's flush that he was indeed the man.

"You'll pay for them sheep," the herder said weakly.

"I was just telling him about old Spot," Rags said. "I asked him who ordered him to do it, but he don't want to say."

"I think he'd find it a lot healthier on some other range," Ed said thoughtfully, "especially if there's another horse killed around his herd."

The herder licked at dry lips.

"It would be a shame if he had to go to the hospital like Montana and Midge Smith," Rags contributed.

"Where's his rifle?"

"He dropped it back yonder a piece."

"Did he break it?"

"I'm afraid he did."

"I'll go see," Ed said. He soon found the rifle, and swinging it hard against the ground he broke the stock.

When he returned he said, "Yes, he broke the stock right off, I'm afraid. I fear this will be only the first of his bad days. Shall we go?"

"Let's," Rags said.

They had thrown a scare into this shepherd that he wasn't likely to forget, but they were worried. "Do you think Rice will have us arrested for these sheep?" Rags asked.

"If he does we'll have him arrested for shooting horses. I don't think Rice wants to mess with the law. But from now on you better keep off the range."

"Don't you like my company?"

"I like it a lot. That's why I don't want to lose you."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"No, I've got to go to Salvadore."

When they parted she extended her hand. "It's been quite a day," she said. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

ED HEADED for Salvadore immediately. He wanted to glean a little information, and he wanted to see some of the cowmen who had been intimidated into giving up their range without a fight.

Reaching Salvadore he put up his horse and walked back up Main Street. The town had changed much since he had left, and he was only another stranger, yet many people turned to look after him as he passed. There was a range war on, and every stranger wearing a gun was suspected of being a part of it.

Ed entered the Golden Gate Saloon, and instantly was greeted by Johnny Buhler, son of Uncle Bill's best friend.

"Hi, there, Ed. We heard you were back in circulation. How's the boy?"

Johnny, a fat youth with little shoebutton eyes set in a fleshy face, extended his hand. Beside him stood his brother Cash, a couple of years older, and a tall, dark man of thirty with a deputy sheriff's star on his vest.

The Buhler boys were a little older than the Ragner kids, and Ed was remembering that they had always tried to make life miserable for Rags and her brothers. He never had liked them, and it was doubtful if he would have recognized them a day or so ago, but recent events had sharpened his memory. Johnny had been a fat-rumped kid when Ed left, but now he plainly fancied himself a man of the world.

Ed shook the pudgy, clammy hand with as much enthusiasm as he could, and then said hello to Cash.

"How ya?" Cash said without enthusiasm.

"Want you to meet a pal of ours," Johnny said. "Bruff Mason, Deputy Sheriff."

Ed let his gaze flicker over the deputy, and he didn't like what he saw. Mason looked fully capable of filling his office, but his eyes were too hard, and they set too closely together. Ed's first thought was to wonder why a man like that should have taken up with the Buhlers.

"How're you, Coleman?" the deputy said. "Have a drink?"

As they were drinking their whisky Mason said, "I hear you roughed up a couple of sheepherders this morning."

"One of 'em tried to gun me, and I happened to beat him to it. By rights I should have killed him. Did they file charges?"

"No, Montana said it was just one of those things. Seems to think it might be different next time." There was no hint of where the man stood in the range war.

"I hear Rags Ragner was with you," Johnny said. "I can remember how she used to hang around you like a bee to clover blossom. She still must think you're some pun'kins."

"If I were you, Coleman," Bruff Mason said, "I don't think I'd be seen much with that Ragner dame."

"I'm in the habit of choosing my own friends, Mason," Ed returned coldly.

The deputy slammed his whisky glass down hard on the bar and went out. Cash Buhler accompanied him, but Johnny remained.

"Wouldn't git Bruff sore at me if I was you," Johnny said. "He's a good man to have on your side in this range scrap."

"Where do you stand in it?" Ed asked bluntly.

"On our side, of course, but there's nothing much we can do. We're sort of tied up with the Ferrys, and since they think the sheep won't hurt us we're keeping out of it. Of course we ride for old Bill's horses when we can, but I'm afraid that between the sheep and the Ragners he ain't gonna have many left."

"You're mighty sure about the Ragners being guilty."

"Hell, yes. They've always been thieves. Bruff Mason was the first officer ever tried hanging anything onto 'em, and it didn't take him long to send 'em over the road," Johnny said.

"You know what I think?" Ed asked. "I don't think any Ragner ever stole a horse in his life."

JOHNNY BUHLER'S little shoe-button eyes popped, and it was a moment before he recovered. "Bill Leeds don't think that," he said, "and Bruff Mason sure don't."

Ed said, "Whereabout were those horses being kept when the deputy found Bill's horses among 'em?"

"In the livery pasture. They sold 'em to a man named Blount, and he brought 'em down here. He didn't examine the brands very close, said he knew there was a few of Leeds's Bar L's in the bunch, but thought nothing of it because the Ragner boys told him they were authorized to sell for Bill Leeds."

"Then the bill of sale he got must have described them," Ed said quickly.

"In a way it did." Johnny grinned. "Hunt waited until it was after dark to write it out and him and Dewey both signed it. It just said they had sold twenty-three horses wearing their Rocking R and other brands.

"Blount didn't bother to read it by match light. He said he know there were some Bar L's in the bunch, but the Ragners told him they had bought 'em from Bill Leeds. He would have let it pass, but Bruff Mason was on the job, and he rode over and asked Leeds if he had sold any horses to the Ragners, and of course he hadn't."

To Ed the frame-up was too obvious to need explanation. Rags had told him that the man Blount was a stranger whom Mont Ferry had sent to the Ragners to buy horses. She claimed the man had lied about there being any Bar L's, but since some of the horses had been bought from other people and rebranded Hunt had included the words, "Other brands."

What had happened was that during the night someone had substituted six of Leeds's horses, which had been rebranded with the Rocking R, and removed six head which the Ragner boys had sold. But the evidence had been strong enough to send the Ragner boys to prison.

He got away from Johnny and just before dark went down to the livery stable. "Decided to stay in town tonight," he said. "I'd like my horse turned in the pasture."

"Feed ain't very good, but if you say so." The man shrugged.

"Not worried about the feed. What I'm worried about is that he may get out and go home. Rub a gate down or something."

"Don't worry about that. My fence is good. Only one gate and it's kept locked all the time," the man said reassuringly.

"Anybody else got a key?" Ed asked suspiciously.

"Nobody but Bruff Mason, the deputy sheriff. He picks up strays once in a while and pays me to pasture 'em."

Certain pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall together. Old man Ike Buhler was doing his best to convince Uncle Bill that the Ragners were stealing from him. That could be to cover up thefts

by his own sons. Bruff Mason was their friend, and he alone could have substituted Leeds's horses during the night. Blount was a hired stooge. But he had been sent to the Ragner's by Mont Ferry.

With the Ragner boys out of the way there was no one to oppose the sheep, except Rags, and she had escaped by an oversight. Was it possible, Ed wondered, that the Ferry brothers had made some kind of a deal with A.P. Rice by which they were to help him steal the Reef River range in exchange for immunity for themselves?

LATER Ed encountered Jim Waverly, one of the men he wanted to see. They shook hands and had a drink, but Waverly had the appearance of a beaten man. "I haven't seen any of your cows on Reef River, Jim," Ed said tentatively.

"Nope, I had to pull out."

"Why?"

"Hell, man, a little one-horse outfit like mine couldn't fight old man Rice," Waverly said. "All I could have done was kill him, and I would. But my wife made me promise to quit. I still got enough range around my ranch to make a living, and that's a lot better than being hanged."

"Yes, I guess you're right," Ed admitted.

"If that Ferry outfit had helped us it would have been different. They're the only ones with size enough to make a good fight, and the rest of us would have helped 'em."

"Mont and Pat always were selfish."

"What Rice wants is to get his hands on Bill Leeds's ranch and the Ragner place. Then he'll be in position to move in on Ferrys."

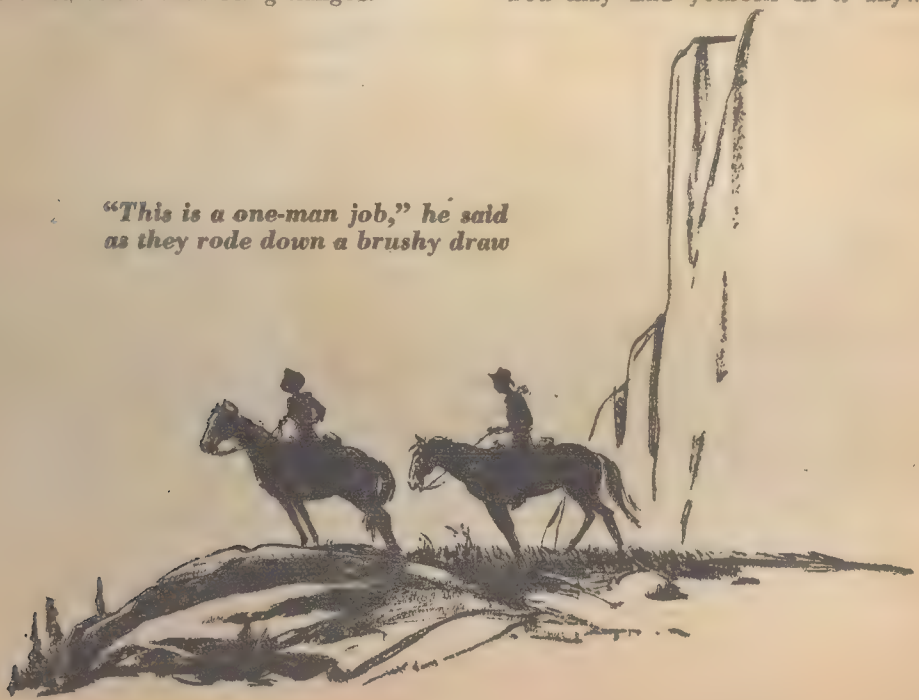
Ed hadn't given that angle any thought, but it was reasonable. Mont and Pat must have thought of it before this.

Waverly was a likeable man, but plainly he was trying to drown his sorrows in whisky. Ed managed to remain sober.

There were a couple of commissary men from the Rice outfit whom he had seen at the camp that morning. They, too, were getting gloriously drunk. At first they stayed away from Ed, but finally he got them into conversation.

"This ain't our fight," one of them said. "We just work there. Rice has men like Montana and Midge Smith, and herders like Mose Hansen who shot a hole in that gal's hat the other day, to do that."

"You may find yourself in it anyway



*"This is a one-man job," he said as they rode down a brushy draw*

if any more horses are killed," Ed told them ominously.

They said they had a big load of supplies already on their wagon and were going back to the range next morning.

Ed went back to Jim Waverly. "You're getting pretty tight, Jim," he said. "Don't you think you should be getting home?"

"I'm all right," Waverly said. "I'm here in a wagon. Left my team unhitched. I'll just untie 'em and climb in and they'll take me right to my gate."

A little after midnight Ed saw the two commissary men stagger outside and head for their wagon, and he followed them. Their four-horse team was tied to the wagon, and after considerable drunken effort they got their blankets out of the wagon and rolled into them.

Ed had had enough to drink to feel devilish. He waited until they were sound asleep, then carried them one by one and dumped them into the back of Jim Waverly's wagon on the same feed lot. Neither one woke up enough to do more than grumble a little.

He had no more than finished before Waverly himself approached, taking most of the street in which to walk. He untied his team, climbed in, headed them for home, tied up the lines, and sank from sight beneath the spring seat. In the morning the two commissary men would find themselves twenty miles from town, in the opposite direction from their camp.

There was no one around. Ed hitched up the four-horse team to the commissary wagon, climbed into the seat and headed for Reef River.

TWO MILES out was Reef River Falls, where the river made a thirty-foot plunge into a narrow gorge. After considerable maneuvering Ed backed the wagon right down a steep slope just above the falls as far as he dared.

He set the brake firmly, climbed down and unhitched the horses. Then he unharnessed them and threw the harness up on the wagon. Lastly, he unfastened the brake, and the loaded wagon began to roll slowly down the slope, quickly gathering momentum. Ed hung onto the tongue as long as he could to guide it, then let go.

The wagon hit the water with a great splash, but remained right side up. It turned slowly as the current caught it, turned over on its side, then drifted with more and more rapidity toward the falls. Ed saw it go over, but if any crash sounded it was drowned out by the roar of the falls itself.

He had kept the bridle on one horse. He mounted the animal now, rode back nearly to town, turned the animal loose and threw away the bridle. He got back to his room in the hotel without being seen and looked at his watch. It was just a little after three o'clock.

Come the morrow there were going to be two surprised commissary men, and an angry sheepman when A. P. Rice discovered that a wagonload of supplies seemingly had vanished from the earth.

Ed knew those falls. There wouldn't be enough of that wagon left to make kindling wood. He rolled into bed with the happy certainty that if A. P. Rice wanted war he at least was going to get a taste of it.

Ed didn't leave town until the next afternoon. None of the parties concerned in last night's episode had showed up. At home, his uncle was waiting for him in a state of high excitement.

"Where in hell have you been?" Bill shouted. "If you ain't got more sense than be out with that she-catamount Rags Ragner, you oughta be hanged."

"I wasn't, but if I'd felt like it I would," Ed returned a little angrily. "So far she's the only person around here I've seen with any guts. What d'ya mean—oughta be hanged?" he added.

"Where was you?" Leeds insisted so earnestly that Ed took notice.

"What's all this about?" Ed demanded. "Something happened?"

Bill Leeds removed his dark glasses and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Maybe the tears Ed saw came from the sunlight, he didn't know.

"That crazy girl has gone and done it now," Bill said. "She's killed a man."

"What?"

"I knew it was coming," Bill said. "I'd

have cut off my arm to keep them kids outa trouble. I thought sending Hunt and Dewey to the pen might teach Rags something, but it ain't."

Ed looked at his uncle in surprise. The old man was still fond of the Ragner kids, no matter what he believed against them.

"Who did she kill?" he asked more gently.

"A sheepherder named Hansen. They say he shot a hole through her hat the other day. Wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't shot him in the back."

"Rags never done that," Ed said positively.

"Reckon she did. Bruff Mason was here not over an hour ago with a posse, looking for her. He said that not only Hansen's campmover seen her, but also Mrs. Rice and Rice's secretary. With that get-up of hers nobody could mistake her."

"They saw her shoot Hansen?"

"Nope, but they saw her coming from his camp."

"It'll take a damned sight more evidence than that to convince me," Ed asserted hotly.

"Now I asked you where you was?" Bill reminded him.

"In Salvadore," Ed answered.

After more questions, he realized that Rags was in real trouble. It wouldn't help any when it came out that she had drawn a gun on at least two other sheepherders while with Ed. He was minded to hustle on over to her place, but Bill talked him out of it.

"If you want to do her any good, keep out of a row with the law," Bill advised. Emil Larsen and his wife, who lived in Bill's house and worked for him, added their arguments to their employer's.

ED WAITED, and an hour or so later Bruff Mason and his posse, which consisted of Johnny and Cash Buhler, rode by with Rags. She was keeping her chin up, Ed saw with relief, riding as proudly as if she were leading a parade.

Mason stopped somewhat reluctantly when Ed headed them off.

"Hello, Ed," Rags said. "It looks as if they're sweeping out another cell for a Ragner."

"I'll be damned if they are," Ed said. "They've got to have a little evidence first."

"We got it," Mason said laconically. "She was seen half a mile from where Hansen was killed by a bullet same caliber as her rifle uses."

"He's a liar," Rags said. "After I left you I went straight home and put out a wash. Haven't been off the place."

"Women usually do their washing in the morning instead of the afternoon," Mason said.

"I wash when it comes handy."

"When she ain't out shooting at people, she means," Johnny Buhler sniggered.

"Some time, Johnny, you'll shoot off your mouth one time too many," Ed said.

"If I didn't know you were in Salvadore last night, my friend, I'd be taking you in with me," Mason said. "I may yet, if Rice gets around to charging you with killing his sheep."

Rags said with sudden indignation, "Can you imagine those two women lying like they did about seeing me up there? I'm not surprised at that honey-haired shepherdess lying about me, but I surely didn't think Mrs. Rice was that sort of a person."

"Daniel Boone saw you too," Johnny Buhler said.

"Who the hell is Daniel Boone?" Ed blurted.

"Hansen's campmover."

"Come on, Miss Ragner, we haven't got all day," Mason said.

"I'll see you in town, Rags," Ed promised. The case looked bad, but he didn't believe for a moment that Rags was guilty.

"You see," Bill Leeds said.

"I see nothing, except that there are a lot of first-rate liars in this country," Ed snapped.

HE RODE into A. P. Rice's camp early the next morning. It was a plenty hostile atmosphere, and he knew that here a man could get his head shot off as easy as not. But he was resolved that he wasn't going to be the only one.

Montana and Midge were there, both

wearing bandages. Midge's glare was pure hatred, but big Montana managed a surprising grin. With them was a weird-looking youth wearing a battered old fur cap and overalls splotched with sourdough.

Ed wasn't interested in these. He stopped his horse directly in front of a little group consisting of Rice and his wife, and Mildred Baines, who he now understood was ward as well as secretary to Rice.

"What are you doing here?" Rice thundered.

"It looks as if he was trying to ride his horse into my tent," Mildred Baines said acidly.

Ed swung down and backed his horse a little way from the tent. He had never seen anyone who could get under his skin the way the Baines girl did.

He addressed his first remark directly to her. "I understand you claim to have seen Rags Ragner up on the range day before yesterday."

For some seconds the girl's pencil continued to scratch on the pad she was using. Then she said sharply, "I did. Are you questioning my veracity?"

"If that means do I think you're lying, I do," he retorted.

"Mr. Rice, am I to be insulted?" Miss Baines demanded.

"Look," Ed cut in, "you're trying to swear a girl's life away. Rags wasn't anywhere near there."

"I hope they hang her," Miss Baines said, and continued to write.

In sudden fury Ed kicked over the folding table on which the girl was writing. "Damn you," he raved, "pay attention to me. Of all the cold-blooded, contemptible little liars—"

Rice started forward, but found Ed's gun against his stomach. "Have your monkeys behave or you get a slug in the guts," Ed grated.

Mrs. Rice spoke up then in a quiet tone. "I'm afraid there is no mistake, young man. I deeply regret it, but I was out painting and Mildred was with me when Miss Ragner appeared suddenly on a ridge just a little way from us. Her actions seemed very queer. Always before she has seemed, ah, rather bold, and inclined to talk. This time she turned her face away before we could see it and spurred the other way."

Despite himself Ed was impressed by the white-haired lady's dignified statement. But he said quickly, "Then you didn't see her face?"

"Well, perhaps not," Mrs. Rice admitted, "but we certainly recognized her red hair and the costume she always wears."

"As if anyone could mistake that outrageous get-up," Miss Baines sniffed.

Mrs. Rice said, "I've often wished she had let me paint her. She is certainly picturesque. I hope the law won't be hard on the poor girl."

AUTOMATICALLY, Ed touched his hat in salute to Mrs. Rice. He didn't question her sincerity. He holstered his gun, and was about to mount when the youth in the fur cap began to speak.

"I saw her too," he said. "She's purty."

"Pretty!" Miss Baines sniffed.

"I felt bad when Mose told me he had shot at her," the youth called Daniel Boone by his companions went on. "He ruined her purty hat."

"But she was wearing that hat with the holes in it when you saw her right after Hansen was killed, wasn't she?" Miss Baines demanded.

"Yes, ma'am, I saw the holes in it," Daniel said.

"Before you leave here, Coleman, I've got something to say to you," Rice cut in. "One of my herders quit because he claims you and the Ragner girl terrorized him and killed twenty of my sheep. If I hadn't taken the price of them out of his wages I'd certainly have you arrested for it."

"Go ahead, old man," Ed invited. "Let's get this horse killing business in court too. I'd like nothing better than to make you tell on the witness stand just how damned greedy and vicious you are."

He swung up on his horse and started to ride away, but Montana called, "How about a word with me, pal?"

"Okay, but walk out away from the rest and keep your hands where they belong."

Montana walked fifty yards from the

others. "After what I saw I don't reckon to swap shots with you," the foreman said. "Midge still thinks he's the better man, but his arm is stiff."

"What do you want to see me about?"

"A four-horse team and a wagon and a couple commissary men," Montana said.

"You think I've got 'em in my vest pocket?"

"No, but they've sure turned up missing, and if that sort of thing keeps on I'm gonna be awful short on sheepherders. Thought mebbe you might've seen 'em," Montana said plaintively.

"Sorry, but I'm too busy to ride herd on your herders," Ed said. This Montana was no fool, and he was a fighting man. Ed wasn't fooled by the way he pretended to accept defeat.

Ed rode back to Salvadore, doing some hard thinking. He was on the trail of something, he was sure, but he didn't quite know what. He believed now that Hansen had been killed either by Rags or by somebody impersonating her, and since he refused to believe that it was Rags, there had to be an impersonator.

Her flamboyant outfit could be copied easily enough, and if there was somebody around about her size who wanted to kill Hansen, that would be the answer.

He could think of only three men who possibly might be mistaken for Rags at a distance, providing they were wearing the same kind of clothes. First was the little gunman, Midge Smith, who was even smaller than Rags. Second was Johnny Buhler, who was about her height, but a lot fatter. The third man was Pat Ferry, who was almost exactly Rags's size, but too homely to mistake if anyone ever saw his face.

What bothered him was that the killer had even copied the two holes in Rags's hat. Two of the candidates for the masquerade, Midge Smith and Pat Ferry, had seen her after Hansen had shot the holes through it. Midge Smith was the likely candidate.

THE TOWN was full of people when Ed arrived. He made for a group of men wearing range garb, some of whom he recognized. Old Ike Buhler was haranguing the group.

"That's what comes of letting a gal grow up like a boy," the old man shouted. "I'd sooner trust an Apache Injun than a gal kin ride and shoot like she can."

"Would you vote to hang her, Ike?" someone queried.

"Damned right. She's got it coming."

"Me, I'd vote to hang a medal on her for killing that sheepherder," another said. To Ed's surprise the speaker was Pat Ferry.

"You sticking up for that vixen, Pat?" Buhler demanded incredulously.

"Maybe I am. I'm getting damned tired of having to ride around every patch of brush I come to. Small favors thankfully received."

Another man said, "I notice you and Mont are inclined to let somebody else do your fighting for you in this range war."

Pat turned upon the man in fury. "If

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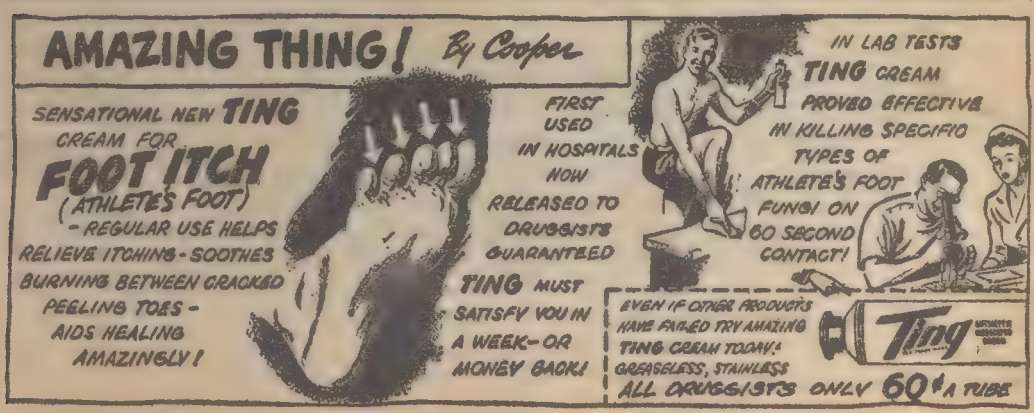
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you think I need somebody else to do my killing for me, start something."

The man shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Later, Ed met Mont Ferry. "Well," Mont said, "it looks like your girl friend sure called her shot and put that shep right in the side pocket."

The remark angered Ed. He had been about to tell Ferry of his suspicion that an impersonator of Rags was loose on the range, but decided against it.

"Still keeping neutral, are you, Mont?" he asked.

"Why not? I can defend my own range, so there's no use sticking my neck out for somebody else," Ferry said coldly.

Ed saw Rags in the jail. She was still wearing her impudent costume, but it looked badly out of place behind bars.

"Hello, Ed," she said, "I've been expecting you."

"You have? I'm only a visitor, so far."

"I'm only glad they couldn't tie you in this with me."

He caught and held her soft brown hands through the bars, and he saw her lips start to tremble and tears appear in her eyes.

"None of that," he said. "We ain't licked yet. Have you seen a lawyer?"

"Yes, the same one who defended the boys. He thinks I'm lying."

"Damn lawyers," Ed gritted. "Look, Rags, those people did see somebody who dressed and looked like you, and I'm going to find out who it was."

"Only person I know mean enough to do a thing like that is that honey-haired shepherdess, Mildred Baines. And she's too crooked to shoot straight enough to kill a man."

"Rags, are you willing to gamble your life on a deal that will hang you sure if it don't prove you're innocent?"

"I don't know what it is, but I'm game," she said. "I know I didn't shoot Hansen."

"Then I'm going to the prosecuting attorney and demand that he send the bullet that killed Hansen away to a ballistics expert. If we don't demand it they'll rest their case on the fact that it was fired from the same calibered gun. But if it was fired by some other gun, the bullet will be different."

"I'll take the chance," Rags said soberly.

He kissed her through the bars when he left, the first time their lips had ever met.

NEXT, he hunted up her attorney, a man named Cole, and insisted upon the man's going to the prosecutor with him. He told Cole what he had in mind, and the man protested vigorously until Ed made him understand that it was what Rags wanted and that he would go alone if need be.

King, the prosecuting attorney, smiled when the proposition was laid before him. "I think I've got a hanging case without that, but if you want to put a rope around your own client's neck, go ahead," he said.

They got Rags's rifle and fired a bullet from it into a thick plank, and then dug out the bullet. Ed watched the bullets wrapped, read the letter the prosecutor wrote to a big city police department and walked away, with the uneasy feeling that he might have put a noose around Rags's slender neck.

He went into a restaurant for supper, and tensed when he heard a giggle in the next booth that reminded him of someone, he couldn't think who. Then the giggle became a voice which he recognized only too well.

"Oh, Mont, you do say the silliest things," Miss Mildred Baines remarked.

"What's silly about saying I don't want you hanging around those sheep till you get to looking like one," came Mont Ferry's chuckling voice. "Old man Rice already does."

"Oh, he does not. He's a perfectly darling old man, and don't forget that he is my guardian."

"Not likely to, if you're going to inherit all his money."

"Are you just a fortune chaser?" Miss Baines asked archly.

Mont's voice dropped a little, but Ed could still hear him. "Right now I'm just chasing you, honey-bunch, but if the fortune comes with it I won't turn it down."

"I think you're mercenary," she said coyly.

"Yeah, maybe I am," Mont admitted. "And don't tell me you ain't got a head on you for business."

Miss Baines's laughter sounded quite pleased.

Mont went on more earnestly, "If I wasn't crazy about you I'd be in there alongside Ed Coleman and the Ragner gal giving old A. P. the fight of his life."

"They make me sick," Miss Baines said frankly. "Coleman is nothing but a bully, and as for that creature you call Rags, I just hope they hang her, that's all I've got to say."

"Aw, look, you're too pretty to have bloodthirsty thoughts like that," Mont laughed. There was silence, then a little rustling sound, and then the undeniable smack of a kiss.

Ed was nauseated and he wanted to leave, but he forced himself to stay on the off chance that he might overhear something that would help Rags.

He heard nothing of any importance, and at last Miss Baines said, "I really must be getting back to camp. The Rices will be worried about me."

"Don't they know you'll be safe with me?"

"I wonder if I am," she said. "Some queer things happen. Two of our men and a wagonload of supplies have simply vanished. I wouldn't want that to happen to me."

"I reckon old A. P. would sure be broke up if something did," Mont said casually.

"There just isn't anything they wouldn't do for me," Miss Baines said proudly.

They stood up, and for the first time caught sight of Ed in the next booth. They couldn't help knowing that he must have overheard everything they said.

"Oh!" Miss Baines gasped, and her face turned red.

"I've an idea maybe you didn't choose that booth by accident," Mont said suddenly angry.

"You want to make something of it, Mont?" Ed asked.

"Not this time, while there's a lady present. But another time—" Mont left the threat unfinished.

EVERY OTHER day Ed rode into Salvadore to see Rags. He learned that she had no other callers, and she was pathetically glad to see him. Confinement to a cell for a girl who had always been free as air must have been hell, but she voiced no complaints. Instead, she worried about him.

She had sent out for a dark dress with all accessories, and his eyes bugged out when he saw her the second morning. To the best of his recollection, it was the first time he had ever seen her in anything except pants. She had been striking in her Mexican outfit, but there was a feminine allure about her now that made him strangely shy.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Don't you like my dress, or have I got it on wrong or something? I'm not used to the darn things."

"You look fine," he said. "You just sort of took my breath away."

"I suppose Uncle Bill is happy now that I'm in jail," she said, with the first trace of bitterness she had displayed.

"No, he ain't. He won't admit it, but he's worried as much as I am. The old coot still likes you, Rags, and the boys too. He asked me how you were fixed for money to fight the case."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Are you sure he still likes me?"

"Just as sure as that I like you myself. He thinks you're guilty as hell, but he'd sell his last horse to get you out of this."

"That makes me feel a lot better." She sighed. "But I wish he could believe in me."

"He'll come around."

"What have you been doing," she asked, "getting shot at?"

"No more. What's more, I haven't seen any more dead horses. Those sheps seem to be a little less gun-crazy lately. I see 'em at a distance, but they're more respectful."

"But they're still stealing the range."

"They've about got it sewed up."

"Well, you be careful. I don't want you in here with me."

"I'll keep out of trouble," he promised, but he knew that he might find himself in jail any day.

On the days that he didn't go into town he rode the range, and tried to keep an eye on the Buhler boys. As far as he could see they were attending to their own business.

Once in a while he rode over to the Ragner place just to keep an eye on things. As he rode in one evening he was astonished to see a wash out on the line. He spurred his horse to a gallop, and as he drew up in the yard, Rags came running out. She was half laughing, half crying, and when he swung down he found her suddenly in his arms.

"I'm free, Ed," she cried. "I'm free. That bullet test did it. They said Hansen couldn't have been shot by my gun."

He was as joyful as she was. "That's the best news I ever got," he said as he stroked her hair.

"You weren't doubtful, were you?" she asked, raising her face.

He had been doubtful, but he wasn't going to tell her so. "Ain't science wonderful?" He grinned.

"You going to let me ride with you tomorrow?" she asked.

"Of course. I'll be over early."

"Won't you stay and have supper with me?"

"Another time. Now I'm in a hurry to get home and really rub it into old Bill Leeds."

"Give him my love," Rags said.

Bill Leeds pretended to be skeptical, but Ed could tell how completely relieved the old man was.

"You were so cocksure she was guilty, and she's been proved innocent," Ed said. "The evidence against Hunt and Dewey was a damned sight weaker than it was against Rags. Can't you figure now you could have been just as wrong about them?"

"No, I can't," the old man howled. "They were caught selling my horses."

"You pig-headed old buzzard. I'd be more likely to steal from you than they would," Ed told him.

"I got just this to say—you keep on playing around with that she-catamount and you'll land in the pen with her," Bill warned.

WHEN ED called at the Ragner place next morning, Rags was decked out in her usual costume, except that she wore a brand new black hat similar to her old one, but minus the bullet holes.

"Neat job of darning." Ed grinned.

"Darn my foot. This is new. It came a week earlier than I expected," Rags said.

"Well, try to keep it out of the way of a bullet, especially when your head is in it," he advised.

They rode out on the range, looking for dead horses, but failed to see any. The live animals they saw were wilder than usual, probably because of the earlier shooting, but they seemed to be doing all right. They saw several herds of sheep, and an occasional herder, but they stayed clear of the sheep, and no bullets came their way.

"Ed, it looks like you put the fear of God into 'em," Rags said. "Before you came they'd have shot at us just to pass the time."

"I reckon you had as much to do with that as I did." Ed smiled. "While we're up here, should we call on our friends the Rices?"

"I just escaped one murder rap, and I don't want to get mixed up in another one, which I sure would if I happened to meet Mildred Baines," Rags said.

They were riding the high hills when they saw a man coming up the trail leading a couple of packed horses. "That looks like Daniel Boone," Rags said. "Let's wait."

The youth with the fur cap recognized them and waved. He was grinning broadly when he came up.

"How are you, Oscar?" Rags said.

"I'm fine. Say, you're the only one ever calls me anything but Daniel Boone."

"Would you like to call me Arlene? I've been the victim of a nickname too."

"Nope, I reckon I'll just keep on calling you the purty lady," Daniel said, and Rags blushed.

"That's the nicest compliment I've ever had," she said.

"Dawggone, here I've been wondering for years if you had another name, and all

of a sudden I find out you've got two of 'em." Ed smiled.

"I was sure glad to hear you got out of that jail," Daniel said, "but Mr. Rice and Miss Baines they don't seem to be a bit pleased."

"They wouldn't be," Rags said.

"Look, Daniel," Ed said, "you know now that the woman you thought was Rags here had to be somebody else. Can you tell us anything about her—or him?"

"Him? It sure looked like a her."

"I know. But it could have been somebody dressed up like a woman. What kind of a horse was he riding?"

"Looked just like that bay the purty lady rides so much. Only thing was the purty lady always waves at me, and when I waved that morning she didn't wave back. I thought that was funny."

"If you couldn't see her face, then she couldn't have seen you," Rags said. "But if I had seen you I would have waved. That wasn't me."

"But she was wearing the same hat that Hansen shot the holes in that you—" Daniel Boone broke off and stared. "You got a new hat," he said.

"That's right. I burned the old one."

"Who's your new herder?" Ed asked.

"Name's Brig Johnson. He ain't cranky like Hansen was."

Daniel rode on presently, and Rags said, "Poor fellow. Just because he isn't very bright, everyone picks on him."

"He may not be bright, but neither is he the fool some think," Ed said.

A COUPLE of days later they met Daniel Boone again. "I seen her again," he said excitedly. "She had just took a couple of shots at Brig Johnson, and I seen her when I was bringing my horses in. She had purty red hair just like yours, and she was wearing your hat with the bullet holes in it."

"But I burned that hat, Oscar," Rags said.

"So you did. Then it couldn't have been you. And you'd have waved."

"Yes, I'll always wave," Rags promised.

"This is getting kind of eerie," Ed said when they rode away. "Whoever that is was careful to wait till you got out of jail before showing up again. He must have copied your outfit in every particular, and known your horses well. But there's one place we may have him. When he heard about your hat getting shot up he had to shoot his up too. Now you've got a new hat, and he must be wearing the holey one."

"What makes you so sure it's a man?" Rags asked.

"What woman in the country can ride like you, or shoot like you either?"

"Well, I guess the honey-haired shepherdess couldn't do it at that," Rags said. "But I wouldn't put it past her to try to get me hanged."

Ed rode with her to her home this time, and he didn't decline her invitation to have supper. He expected the small house to be rather untidy, but it was neat and clean, in spite of the fact that half the space seemed devoted to books and old magazines.

"You read all of this?" he asked.

"Is there any law against it?" she countered. "I've read everything that isn't strictly technical, even if I haven't been to school. Father never could bear to part with his library, and every spare cent went for books and magazines."

"Maybe you might teach me to read some time," he said humbly.

"Go on with you. I know you've been to college, even if it was for only a year."

"It didn't take."

"Well, at least you can look at the pictures while I change," she said smilingly, and disappeared into a bedroom.

When she came out she was wearing a white and blue gingham house dress, and she had loosened the heavy braids she usually wore, and her gorgeous hair hung down almost to her waist. It was a pleasure for Ed just to sit and watch her as she went about preparing supper.

IT WAS a warm evening and Ed was sitting beside an open window. It was just dark enough that Rags had lighted a lamp. From time to time she looked up at him and smiled, but only once did she say anything. "You know, Ed, this is the

first time I've had company in the house since Mother died. I'm afraid I don't know how to act."

"You just cook and let me look," he said, and she smiled at him again without self-consciousness.

Ed heard something outside which could have been either a cat or a dog, but he remembered Rags having said that someone had poisoned both her cat and her dog.

He listened until again he heard a shuffling sound. He got to his feet by the side of the window, and when Rags glanced up inquiringly, he motioned her to silence. He peered out cautiously, and saw the body of a man crouched under the window.

His hands shot down and out and fastened upon the man's right wrist. He saw a frightened look upon Johnny Buhler's fat face, and then he brought the arm high and twisted it until Johnny's back was to the wall and he was standing on his tiptoes unable to do more than squirm.

"Ed! Who is it?" Rags asked.

"Did you invite Johnny to supper?"

"Johnny? Of course not."

"Then he must've invited himself. What were you doing here, Johnny?"

"Nothing. Honest I wasn't. I was just passing by and saw your horse—"

"And thought you'd do a little spying, eh, Johnny?"

"Please, Ed. I'm sorry. Leggo my arm, you're twisting it all out of kilter."

Ed twisted it a little more, and Johnny howled with pain.

"You got a pitcher of right cold water, Rags?" Ed queried.

"Sure. Right from the spring. Cold as ice."

"Bring it." When she complied Ed had her pour it slowly down Johnny's sleeve. The fellow shuddered as the icy water ran down his arm, and then down his body. Rags, grinning, emptied the last drop.

"Now we don't want Johnny to get a chill," Ed said grimly. "Get the teakettle, and be sure the water is boiling."

"No, no," Johnny screeched. "Not boiling water! It'll kill me."

Rags looked at Ed curiously. He let go with one hand long enough to point to the pitcher and then the water bucket. She filled it up again.

"You won't like this, Johnny, for it'll scald the hide right off your fat carcass, but it's the doctor's orders," Ed said grimly. "Unless you want to give us some information."

"I don't know anything," Johnny screamed.

"I think a quart or so of boiling water will start your memory working."

"What do you want to know?"

"Several things. First is how you framed Hunt and Dewey."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"All right, Rags, give him a couple tablespoonsful."

RAGS POURED some more cold water down the sleeve. So great was the power of suggestion, and so nearly alike the feel of hot and cold water, that Johnny screamed and writhed with pain.

"Stop, I can't stand it," he shrieked.

"You gotta stand it, unless you want to tell us who did steal Uncle Bill's horses," Ed said relentlessly.

"We did—Cash and me. We took 'em out of the pasture."

"Not entirely accurate, for you mean you stole 'em off the range, branded 'em, and put 'em in the pasture after you took six head of Ragner horses out."

"Yes, that was it."

"That's not nearly enough, Johnny. Who helped you?"

"Nobody."

"More hot water, Rags, and heat it up a little more."

"Honest, nobody helped us. We'd been stealing horses and Bruff Mason was about to catch us. We had to put the heat on somebody else," Johnny pleaded.

"You lie. Bruff Mason helped you. Didn't he?"

"No, honest to God he didn't."

"He had to. Nobody else had the key to the gate."

"I swear he didn't. We—we got the keys away from Stewart long enough to have a duplicate made."

Rags was radiant with joy, but Ed felt

disappointment. He had been so sure that Mason was implicated, and he was still certain of it. But scared as Johnny was of being scalded, his fear of Bruff Mason was greater. And Mason was the man Ed wanted to get.

"There's something else, Johnny," Ed said. "You've got clothes just like Rags and you've been masquerading as her. It was you killed Hansen, wasn't it?"

"No, no, no," Johnny denied. "I couldn't look like Rags. I've told you everything I know," the fellow wailed.

"If the water's hot, Rags, pour it down the rat-hole here."

Rags lifted the pitcher and began to pour. Johnny Buhler screamed, and suddenly went limp. He had fainted.

"Go around and get his gun and keep him covered till I get out there," Ed directed.

It took a dash of cold water in the face to bring Johnny out of his faint. They got him inside, and he looked fearfully at the steaming teakettle. He was painfully holding his shirt away from what he thought was his scalded arm.

"Sit down at that table there and write out a confession that you stole those horses, unless you want a whole teakettleful down the other arm," Ed ordered.

Johnny looked pleadingly from one to the other, then with a sigh began to write.

"Just one thing more, Johnny," Ed said when it was finished. "If you try to deny this, or claim we forced you to sign it, I swear I'll kill you. Now get going."

When they heard Johnny ride away Rags threw her arms around Ed's neck and kissed him. "Oh, you're wonderful," she said. "The boys are going to be pardoned."

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Don't get your hopes too high. He'll repudiate that confession just as quick as he talks to Bruff Mason—and when he finds out he wasn't really scalded."

"Oh, no! I couldn't bear that," Rags said.

"I'm sorry, but the only good it'll do is

[*Turn page*]

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bring things to some kind of a head. We'll make it public, of course, and some people will believe it, but not the law."

It was like hurting a child, and Ed hated to see her wilt, but he was only telling the truth.

"One thing it'll do," he said. "It'll show old Bill what a fool he has been."

She managed a small smile. "Another thing it has done," she said ruefully, "is to burn our supper. And I did so want to make a good impression."

MIDNIGHT was upon them before Ed thought of going home. When they parted her face was tilted upward, and he knew that she wanted him to kiss her, but he wouldn't. Not only was he unsure of his own feelings, and of hers, but both of them were in too much danger to have their lives complicated by a love affair.

Ed let himself into his uncle's house quietly, and didn't disturb anyone. In the morning Bill said grumpily, "Where the hell was you last night? Gadding around with that she-horse thief, I betcha."

"Matter of fact I was," Ed said. "Had supper with her, or at least the coffee wasn't burned."

"I warned **you**—"

"You never said a word about her cooking. We had another visitor, and we persuaded him to do a little writing for us. I want you to listen to it."

Very calmly Ed read Johnny Buhler's confession. Old Bill listened with growing incredulity. "You making that up?" he snorted when Ed had finished.

"You want to call me a liar? Even old Ike Buhler would have to swear that's Johnny's handwriting. And he was writing the truth. Only trouble is he wasn't telling all of it."

"How did you make him write that?"

"We used a pitcher of cold water on him, after we caught him eavesdropping," Ed said. "You don't have to believe what I say, Uncle Bill, but if you don't I'm leaving your house this morning, and I won't be back."

Convinced at last, Bill Leeds said sadly, "What them Ragner kids must be thinking of me."

"If they hated your guts you'd have it coming," Ed said bluntly. "Odd as it is, they hold no malice. Rags is only anxious that you believe in her."

"I been taken in. I mighta knowed Rags never would have let me down. I've been a damned old fool. We gotta git them boys out of the pen."

"Not with this. Johnny will claim we held a gun on him or something, and Bruff Mason is the man we've got to get."

"Will you bring Rags over here?" Bill asked humbly. "I want to ask her pardon."

"I reckon she'll come over, if you send for her. You hide this somewhere, and sort of let it get around that Johnny has confessed. We'll try to keep 'em guessing. I've got more important work to do. My job is to find out who's been masquerading as Rags before he can kill somebody else in a way she can't get clear of it."

"You any idea who it might be?"

"Some. I ain't sure. I'm taking a little ride, and today I don't want Rags with me."

He rode away up Reef River, but presently altered his course toward the range used by the Ferry brothers. Here was the best grass and fattest cattle he had seen anywhere. He wondered if Mont Ferry actually expected to save it by marrying A. P. Rice's ward. If he knew people, Rice would only use the marriage as a wedge to get a foothold on this paradise of a range.

He rode close enough to get a look at the ranch itself with Bill's old spyglass. The Ferrys lived in a fine house, and they had a number of neat little cottages nearby in which lived the Mexican help they employed.

He saw Mont ride away toward Salvadore, and he saw Pat around the ranch. Everything seemed in order. He had been looking for some of the Buhlers to show up, but they didn't. He still didn't know how close the Buhlers and Ferrys were, but it was in his mind that Mont was smart enough to buy up the Leeds and Ragner places ahead of Rice if they could be forced to sell cheaply. Nothing could make him

believe that Mont Ferry was staking all his future on a marriage with Mildred Baines.

DISAPPOINTED after hours of watching, he turned homeward. He saw Larsen run into the house as he approached, and Bill Leeds came out in the yard to wait. The old man was excited.

"You sure got yourself in a devil of a mess!" Bill said. "You gotta hit for the high hills."

"What have I done now?"

"Before this morning I'd have believed you raised hell. Now I'm not so sure, but they claim you and Rags kidnaped the Baines girl."

"What?"

"Her and Mrs. Rice was coming home from town in their buggy last night, and they was held up. They left Mrs. Rice tied up all night and took the girl. Mrs. Rice swears it was you and Rags. Bruff Mason has been here looking for you."

"I suppose they got Rags," Ed said with a leaden heart.

"Not yet, by damn, and they won't as long as I can shoot a shotgun."

"You mean she's here?"

"Got her hid out up in the attic, but I don't see how I can hide you too."

"I'm not hiding. How come she's here?"

"It was some crazy sheepherder they call Daniel Boone who seems to have a case on her. Soon as he heard they was looking for her he tore down to give her a warning. She come right over here, and I made her hide," Bill said.

"You keep her hid. I'll throw some stuff together and take to the hills till I can lay hands on that damned masquerader."

"That fat Johnny Buhler claims he run across you with the girl, and that you threatened to shoot him unless he wrote a confession. Says you thought that would keep him quiet."

Ed was sickened by the way his little trick on Johnny had backfired.

"That gives 'em two eye-witnesses against you," Bill said. "You git out of the country, and soon as I can I'll send Rags out to join you. I'll spend my last dollar fighting for you kids."

"That's decent of you, Uncle Bill, but I'm not running far."

Larsen came up quickly, his simple Danish face a picture of alarm. "Here comes Bruff Mason and his posse."

"Get back in the house, you two," Ed ordered. "This may be it. Bruff Mason ain't going to take me to his crummy jail."

Larsen already was heading for the house, and after a moment Uncle Bill turned to follow him, but Bill growled, "I'll be right in back of 'em."

"You keep out of it," Ed said.

It would do little good to run. They were too close, and someone would get his horse with a rifle. The gate of a high, practically solid pole corral was open, and Ed rode into it. Only his head and shoulders showed above the poles.

THE POSSE rode into the yard. With Mason were the Buhler boys, Montana, Midge Smith and Mont Ferry. Every man was a personal enemy of Ed's.

"Well, it looks like we got you, Coleman," Mason said. "Seems like you've corralled yourself for us."

"But which one of you is coming in after me?" Ed queried. They all looked calm enough except Johnny Buhler, whose fat face was contorted with hatred. "How's your scalded arm, Johnny?" Ed asked.

"Damn you," Johnny said, and reached for his gun. Bruff Mason caught his arm.

"Hold it, Johnny," the deputy said. "Are you going to surrender quietly, Coleman, or do we have to shoot you out of there?"

"Surrender for what?"

"For the kidnaping of Mildred Baines. You're under arrest."

"I haven't seen Miss Baines."

"Why deny it, Ed, when you and Rags have been positively identified?" Mont Ferry said. "Why, the ransom note you left with Mrs. Rice alone is enough to convict you."

"What ransom note?"

"Read it to him, Mason."

The deputy took a piece of paper from his pocket and read, "Mr. A. P. Rice: We're holding your honey-haired shep-

herdess, but we don't want your lousy money. Get your sheep back over the Packsaddle Divide in three days or you'll never see the Baines girl again. The Avengers."

Mont said casually, "I've heard Rags refer to Miss Baines a dozen times as the honey-haired shepherdess, and so have others. Miss Baines is my fiancée, and I'm a damned sight more interested in getting her back than I am in sending you over the road. You tell us where she is, and I'll do my best to give you a break."

"You go to hell," Ed said steadily.

"Where's the Ragner girl?" Mason demanded.

"Right here," came Rags's voice from behind them, "and I'll shoot the first man who looks around."

They had looked around hurriedly, but at sight of the rifle in her hands their heads snapped back.

"Them she can't hit I can git with this splatter gun," Bill Leeds said loudly. "I ain't so blind I can't see where you be."

"By God, I'd rather have Ed and Rags shooting at me than a blind man with a shotgun," Mont Ferry said, and he grinned. "Why don't you people listen to reason? Bring back the girl, and public sympathy will all be on your side."

Ed's gun appeared over the fence. "Keep your hands where they belong, all of you. Unbuckle your guns, one at a time, and let 'em drop. You first, Mont."

Ferry shrugged and unbuckling his gunbelt, let it fall to the ground. One after the other, as Ed called out their names, did the same. Then Rags went forward and pulled their rifles out of the boots.

"Now get going," Ed ordered. "Uncle will take care of the guns for you."

"If you think you can get away with this, you're crazy," Bruff Mason said furiously. "I'll have a hundred men on your trail before dark."

Montana said. "Cowboy, I got to hand it to you. You people have got nerve. It's too bad we're gonna have to shoot you."

"Come on," Mason said. "We've got to get help."

"Why the hell didn't you people keep out of it?" Ed said angrily when the posse left.

"And let you get killed before our eyes?" Rags said. "No, Ed, that isn't the way we do it. We're all in this together."

"But now you've got no place to stay. You'll be hunted."

"So will you. But I am sorry to drag Uncle Bill into this. Where do we go first?"

"Don't worry about me," Leeds said. "You two better get going. Hit for the Desolation. You both know the water holes, and you can hide out a week or so and then leave the country. You watch that they don't come back, Rags, and Ed, you help me fix you up some grub."

FOOD WAS a necessity, but Ed didn't want to be burdened with extra horses. Rags, he knew, meant to go with him, and in his heart he was glad. They made two bundles of foods which they wrapped in a pair of blankets on the backs of their saddles and took plenty of ammunition.

Larsen and his wife came out to wish them good-by, and Bill Leeds shook their hands after they were mounted. Suddenly Rags leaned far over and kissed the half-blind old horseman.

"I'm sorry I got you into trouble, Uncle Bill," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Look here, young lady, I always got myself into my own trouble, and I always will," Bill declared. "Git going—and don't fool yourself thinking that somebody ain't watching."

"Well, Ed," Rags said, "I used to dream of riding away some place with you, but I never thought it would be ahead of a posse."

"I'd like it better myself if it was a honeymoon," he said.

She was silent for a time. Then she said, "I'm not very bright sometimes, Ed. I wasn't really throwing myself at your head. You've got trouble enough without having to try to act like a lover."

"Well, now that you've brought the matter up—" he began.

"Let it ride, Ed. Please."

"If you say so. Look, do you know a water hole on the Desolation where I can find you later?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a look for your honey-haired shepherdess."

"Then I'm looking with you, pardner. We started this thing together, and that's the way we'll see it through," she said with finality.

"Okay, but one of us is going to give the orders, and the other is going to take 'em," he said firmly. "Which is it going to be?"

"I'll take the orders," she said meekly.

"All right. They saw us leave the ranch, but we ought to be smart enough to keep out of sight. We can't hide our tracks, though. I'm going to leave you pretty soon on foot, and you're going to ride like hell toward the Desolation Desert. After it gets dark you can double back if you want to, and meet me about a mile below the Ferry house. But watch your step."

"All right, but what are you going to do?"

"What I told you—look for Mildred Baines."

"In these hills? You'd as well look for a needle in a haystack."

"Look, there were three people could have dressed up in clothes like yours to look like you. One of 'em, Midge Smith, I eliminated long ago. The other, Johnny Buhler, we found out last night wasn't the one."

"And the third?"

"Pat Ferry."

"Pat? You can't mean it," Rags expostulated.

"He's almost your exact size. He saw you get that hole in your hat, so he had to shoot one through his. Mont is my size, and when they kidnaped Baines he could have been dressed like me."

"But I don't get it at all. Why? Mont is sweet on the shepherdess."

"Mont is a cowman, and neither he nor Pat ever were accused of lacking nerve before. In my opinion they've been fighting like hell to hold their range, only nobody knew it. At first they must have figured to start a reign of terror by killing off people like Hansen and having it blamed on you and me.

"I don't believe they ever meant to get you hanged, for it probably would have gone on after you were in jail, and that would have helped you. Then they thought of this kidnaping stunt, and I'll bet my shirt A. P. Rice is pulling his herds back right now," Ed explained.

"It could be. I'd never thought of it. But how can we prove it?"

"I'm going to try to search the Ferry house tonight. It's the only thing to do."

"Then I want to help," Rags insisted.

"And I want you to do what I say. This is a one-man job," Ed said firmly.

As they rode down a brushy draw Ed slipped from the saddle, handed her the reins of his horse and said, "Good luck." He watched her ride away, then began to climb the hillside.

PART OF the posse showed in less than an hour. They were riding rather slowly with Bruff Mason in the lead, carefully following the tracks. Ed gave a sigh of relief when they passed by without seeing where he had quit his horse.

Someone, quite obviously the missing Buhler boys, had been sent back to Salvadore to get help. It wouldn't be long until the country would be alive with people searching for the Baines girl. Most of them would realize that it would be safer hunting for her than following Ed and Rags into Desolation.

He wasn't used to walking, and he had to be constantly alert. He worked his way gradually toward the Ferry ranch, but had to stop when the hills grew lower, and the cover less thick. He could see the ranch, but not the buildings. It had been ten years since he had been this way and he had forgotten some features of the landscape. The other day he had looked down upon the ranch from the other side.

Not far below him was a meadow, and he remembered then that this was where old Buck Ferry, Mont's and Pat's father, had first located. For a time they had lived in a dugout, but even in Ed's day it had been grown over with underbrush. The thought struck him that if it hadn't caved in it would be an ideal place to hide somebody.

Presently he saw a party riding toward the Ferry ranch from the other direction, and he was sure it was the posse coming back. It was the smart thing for Mason to do. Now that he was sure the fugitives had headed for Desolation, he could take his time about making a massive search for them. In the meantime, he would be expected to search for the missing secretary.

Ed saw men behind him, and realized that he was surrounded. He crawled under a thick sarvis-berry bush, and waited, not daring to move until dark.

Late in the afternoon two riders came by and stopped within twenty feet of him. They were Montana and Midge Smith.

"Lord, but it's hot," Midge said.

"Been a damned sight hotter if we'd follered 'em into that Desolation desert, and in more ways than one," Montana replied.

"I'd like to get my sights on that Coleman cuss just the same," Midge declared viciously.

"You can have him," Montana said. "I've seen enough of him. You know what he done to us, and that gal is just as tough. They killed Hansen, and you can't tell me they didn't kill them two commissary men who disappeared."

"You think they killed the Baines girl?"

"If they didn't they've tied her up somewhere to starve."

"Rice is pulling out then?"

"Damned right. Mrs. Rice never was crazy about him starting this range war, and she put her foot down. Said leaving was the only way Mildred Baines's life could possibly be saved. Me, I ain't sorry."

"I wouldn't give ten cents for her life the way it is," Midge said, and they rode on.

Well, Mont Ferry had won his range fight, and nobody would ever know he had been fighting, Ed thought. A. P. Rice wasn't the kind of man to come back for another round, even if the girl was released. Montana had had a bellyful, and that was proof enough that Rice couldn't get a crew to come back even if he wanted to.

It was too hot under the bush to be endured, and Ed crawled out and sat in the shade. Just before dark he saw a number of men riding toward the Ferry place. Among them were Bruff Mason and the Buhler boys.

He guessed, since Mont was with them, that they had been invited to spend the night there, and that would make it doubly difficult for him to try to search the premises for the disguise he hoped to find.

AFTER it became dark he moved down toward the old dugout to satisfy a curiosity that had been gnawing at him all afternoon. He was both thirsty and hungry, but all he could hope for was a drink.

He found the small stream which had attracted old man Ferry's attention to this site in the first place, and he had a drink. He sat up and a night bird zoomed past so close that he instinctively ducked. A moment later he batted his eyes. Then, what seemed to be the biggest firefly he had ever seen revealed itself plainly as a lantern, and it was moving straight toward the old abandoned dugout.

Ed hustled over there. He could see nothing whatever of the old log house he remembered. It came to him then that the building must have rotted away, the old dugout being completely concealed by the rank growth of brush. As he squatted at the edge of the brush he heard a single liquid Spanish word in a feminine voice as the lantern bearer stumbled.

The woman was following a path that seemed to lead to the entrance of the dugout. He heard the murmur of voices that presently quieted. He was tempted to advance, but something warned him to wait.

After a time the Mexican woman emerged from the brush, doused her lantern, and waddled back to the horse she had left. He saw that she was fat; undoubtedly one of Ferry's Mexicans.

He would have laughed at the woman's awkward efforts to mount had the situation been less crucial. She got on at last, clucked to her mount and rode away at a walk.

Ed found himself obliged to wipe the sweat from his face. He knew now that he had guessed right. Miss Baines was in there. But what he was going to do with her he didn't know.

Once he knew the Mexican woman was out of hearing he started looking for the path. It was hard going. He had to crawl, and several times the wild rose bushes scratched his face, and he barely squelched an oath.

It opened up abruptly, and he found himself confronting a thick door of wooden planks made fast by a chain and a heavy padlock. At the bottom was a four-inch slit through which food and water might be passed, evidence to Ed that the kidnaping had been well planned in advance. Undoubtedly the rotting timbers inside had been reinforced recently.

HE STOOD as nearly upright as he could and still keep his head out of the rose bushes which covered the place, and called, "Miss Baines. Are you in there?"

The answer came at once. "Yes. Who are you?"

"Are you all right?"

"I suppose I am, but open that door and let me out of here." Though muffled by the thick door, the voice sounded as coldly composed and commanding as ever before.

"I can't." Ed felt a little grim satisfaction in pronouncing sentence of continued incarceration. "The door's locked, and I got nothing to break it down with."

"Who are you?" the voice asked sharply.

"The name's Coleman. Perhaps you remember me?"

"I thought I recognized your voice, you contemptible kidnaper. Won't your ragamuffin partner trust you with a key?"

Ed felt his anger rise. Nobody that he had ever known had quite the power to arouse his resentment as this girl.

"Listen, shepherdess," he said hotly, "if you want any help you'd better be civil about it."

"I certainly don't expect any help from you."

"Don't you want out of there?"

"I feel much safer with you locked out than I would if you could get in," she retorted.

Ed swore. "You'd be so damned safe with me you'd feel insulted," he shot back. "For heaven's sake, don't you know yet who locked you in there?"

"Of course I do. If you and the Rags creature thought I couldn't see through your silly disguises you are even more stupid than I believed. But you can tell Miss Ragner that though I resent being locked in here, I appreciate your being locked out."

"Listen, you idiot. Rags and I had nothing to do with your being here. It was somebody wearing our clothes, or clothes like ours rather."

"Even a jury won't believe that, let alone a person who recognized you both, which I did. Now are you going to let me go free or not?"

"No. You can stay there and rot for all I care," Ed said furiously.

"Then please go away and let me sleep."

Ed crawled away. He might have broken the door down, but it would be only one more link in the chain that was welded around him and Rags. She was Mont Ferry's baby. Let him have her.

At the moment he was more discouraged than if he hadn't found her. He walked away on stiff legs and sore feet toward the Ferry ranch, but he delayed entrance until every light was out.

He entered the big barn first and guardedly struck a match. There was but a single night horse up, and it wore Mont's saddle. In the harness room, however, were a dozen saddles. The place was crawling with possemen. It would be sheer folly to attempt to look for Pat's masquerade costume with that many men around.

Like any good stockman Ed recognized a saddle and knew who it belonged to if he had ever seen it before. He looked the saddles over until he came to the one he had seen Bruff Mason riding. Because the weather was warm the man's coat was still tied behind the cantle.

After a moment Ed untied it and went through the pockets. In the inside pocket was a bunch of letters. Ed transferred them to his own pocket and tied the coat back on the way it had been before.

He looked longingly at the saddled horse,

but dared not take it. He slipped away and trudged the mile or so to the place where he knew Rags would be waiting, unless she had met with misfortune.

SHE WAS there. They had agreed upon signals, and she answered his coyote call promptly with a bird whistle. "Oh, Ed," she cried out, "are you all right?"

"Sure. Have you eaten all that grub yet?"

"Of course not. Help yourself. Has anything happened?"

"I've found the shepherdess, but I ain't found a way to turn her loose."

They talked the matter over while he devoured a few sandwiches. "Those dirty Ferrys," she said angrily. "To pull a low-down trick like that on us."

"They got what they wanted. Old man Rice is pulling out."

"And we're going to prison. Even poor old Uncle Bill for helping us get away. Hadn't we better start riding?"

"No, but we'd better start hiding. The last place they'll look for us is right around here. We're going back to the cabin tomorrow night, and every other night till somebody besides that Mexican woman shows up. It's the only chance we'll ever have to get ourselves in the clear."

"You mean Mont or Pat may come after her?"

"They may. If Mont wants to make himself a hero, he'll pretend to find her himself. That won't be so good for us. But if I know Mont he don't care anything about the girl, and he only wants what he wants. They're more likely to use their disguises and make bloody sure she thinks it's us. It's just a little too close to his place for him to feel comfortable about her being found there."

They left their horses in a draw where Rags had stalked them, and walked across the meadow until they were hidden in the brush not far from the dugout. Fortunately, they had brought a canteen so that they wouldn't suffer from thirst, and they still had food.

They removed their boots and stretched out, and Ed was soon asleep. When he awoke the sun was just coming up and Rags was sitting there comfortably, watching him.

"You don't sleep with your mouth open," she reported.

"Don't I? Do I sleep with my whiskers in or out of the covers? I never was able to find out."

Ed took a chance on going down to the spring to refill the canteen. It was going to be a long, hot day.

When he returned he thought of the letters he had stolen, and looked them over. A quick exclamation brought Rags hastily to his side.

"Just listen to this," he said, and began to read. "Dear Bruff: What the hell is wrong? I've had a fast market lined up for fifty head of horses for two weeks. Even if you have to be careful why can't you send the Buhlers down through Desolation with a bunch. This fellow has to have action, and he won't wait much longer. Blount."

"Why—why that proves Mason and Blount and the Buhler boys have been in this together stealing horses!" Rags stammered.

"It'll clear Dewey and Hunt, if we can hang onto it long enough to get it to a judge," Ed agreed. "And it clears up another point. They've not been working with the Ferrys. I wasn't sure about that." He gave the letter to Rags and she stuffed it down her boot.

Before long they saw the members of the posse riding away. They still seemed more interested in searching the hills for Mildred Baines than in pursuing the fugitives. Ed and Rags marveled at the cool nerve of the Ferrys as they rode past within three hundred yards of the dugout.

They saw no one else during the long day, but in the evening Mont and Pat returned alone. When it grew dark Ed and Rags moved close to the dugout.

"Wait till I get a chance to tell that dame a few things," Rags said. "I've got a few things to say to her."

"Don't try it," Ed advised. "She can hand out more abuse with an eyebrow than you can talk in a week."

ONE BY one the stars came out and the pale sliver of a silver moon rode finally to rest in the western hills. Again only the occasional swoop of a night bird or spasmodic yap of a coyote disturbed the silence as the hours passed. The chill of the night air made the two watchers shiver from cold, but they couldn't bring themselves to go away, when their liberty or even their lives might depend upon the outcome.

They knew the Mexican woman hadn't come, and it didn't seem likely they would leave Miss Baines another day without attention of some kind.

"Don't reckon she's enjoying it much either," Ed tried to console his companion.

"At least I'll bet she's warm, and she can sleep," Rags said.

"I'm as jittery as a lizard on a hot rock," Ed confessed.

Then, suddenly, came the unmistakable tread of slow-moving hoofs, and presently a solitary horseman stopped beside the lone haw-bush where the woman had left her horse the night before. Ed knew that it was the same woman. She climbed awkwardly from the saddle, but continued to stand there while the tense nerves of the watchers grew ever more taut.

"Why don't she do something? Do you think she heard us?" Rags whispered.

"Naw, she ain't spooky. She's waiting for something."

The night breeze became stronger, rustling the bushes around them and making listening more difficult. And then two more horsemen, leading an extra horse, joined the Mexican woman, and the three of them approached the dugout.

"Well, I'll be damned," Rags gave vent to an unladylike expression. "It's you and me, and we're wearing masks."

"Pinch yourself. No wonder the sheep ladies were fooled."

The tall form on lead even seemed to walk like Ed, and the one behind was dressed like Rags from crown to toe. They could even see a mass of hair that undoubtedly was a heavy red wig.

"They're gonna turn her loose," Ed whispered.

THE THREE stopped where the trail went under the rose bushes, and the Mexican woman disappeared. "They can copy everything except our voices. That's why they've brought the woman along," Ed whispered again.

They heard the clanking of the chain and padlock as they drew a little closer, and the door opened. The other two figures crept under the bushes.

"You no come in, Señors," the Mexican woman cried out with alarm. "The señorita is not yet dressed."

She had slipped up on that one, Ed thought, but Mildred Baines wasn't likely to notice the little error in the matter of sex.

Ed and Rags now were no more than ten feet from the door. They could hear every word.

"Eet is that you are going home now, Señorita," the Mexican woman said. "Eet is I who are glad, no?"

"No, it's I who am glad, if it's so," came Mildred's still unconquered voice. "But am I to be turned out in the middle of the night to try to find my way home?"

"But no, Señorita. You are to have the escort. Come in, Señor and señorita."

"That time she didn't forget her lines," Ed muttered grimly as he removed his gun from the holster.

Mildred Baines was speaking. "I suppose you have become frightened and have decided to turn me loose, Miss Ragner and Mr. Coleman. Well, let me tell you that you'll pay for this anyway. And I want to tell you, Miss Ragner, that your companion in crime tried to break down this door last night and get in here."

"Why, the lying little so-and-so," Ed breathed, and Rags almost broke into a giggle which Ed stopped by a sharp jab of the elbow.

The Ferrys didn't speak, but the Mexican woman was explaining that Miss Baines would have to submit to a blindfold.

It was time for the pay-off. Gun in hand, Ed crept through the bushes and appeared in the door. The Mexican woman was just pulling a flour sack down over Miss Baines's head, and the two masked men were watching.

"Don't move!" Ed said as he stepped inside, but Pat Ferry whirled and went for his gun, preferring death to exposure. Ed fired, his shot just a shade ahead of Pat's, which slammed into the log front of the dugout, and Pat pitched forward.

Mont Ferry had reacted as quickly as his brother, but in a different manner. He tackled Ed in a way a football player might have envied. His head smashed into Ed's stomach, knocking the wind out of him and collapsing him on the floor. Ferry seized Ed's gun as he, too, went down, and tried to bend it against Ed's body.

Breathless though he was, Ed kept the gun away and tried to roll Mont off him, but Mont had the advantage, and his free hand went to his own gun. It had just cleared the holster when Rags struck him on top of the head with the barrel of her sixgun. A glassy look came into Mont's eyes, and he went limp.

With the breath back in him again, Ed snatched the mask from Mont's face and toppled his foe over onto the floor, where Rags pointed her gun at the man's heart.

MILDRED BAINES succeeded in extricating herself from the flour sack that had been pulled over her head, and dropping on her knees beside Mont Ferry, she cried, "Oh, Mont, darling, I knew you'd come." She gave Ed a glance that was deadly as a rattllesnake's.

"So you love him, do you?" Ed said sardonically. "Do you know who this is?"

He touched the prostrate figure of Pat Ferry with a contemptuous toe. The big hat with a hole shot through it was still in place over the red wig, and with the short jacket and the bell-bottomed trousers, Pat still looked remarkably like Rags.

"Of course I do," the girl cried. "It's Rags Ragner, and if she's been killed I'm glad of it."

"Take a second look, sister," Ed said, and stooping, he ripped off the mask, the big hat and the red wig, revealing the ugly features of Pat Ferry.

The bewildered girl stared at Pat, then at Rags, and then back at Mont. "Mont, Mont, tell me what it all means?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Mont said disgustedly, "can't you see for yourself?"

Mildred began to sob bitterly, and after a moment Rags put her arms about her comfortingly. Both Rags and Ed could feel pity for her now. She truly had been in love with Mont Ferry.

But even a Mildred Baines could withhold belief no longer. Mont Ferry had made a supreme gamble to save his range, and he would take his medicine like a man. With his brother Pat dead, he had no will to fight on.

He said, "Leave Cochita out of this, will you? She didn't know about it."

"It's all right with me," Ed said, "unless we need her as a witness."

"Witness, hell! Pat in those clothes is enough to tell the story, and I'll tell what we done and why. I'm sorry we used Rags the way we did, but I knew the Buhlers and Mason had her framed anyway, or would before they quit. Here, Cochita, this belongs to you."

He started to hand over a wad of bills, but Ed grabbed them. "Hey, these are no good," he said. "All been cut in two."

"To me eet is good," the Mexican woman said quickly. "The other half of this money I have at home."

Ed sighed and gave her the bills. To him it was apparent the woman had no sense of wrongdoing. The gringo boss had commanded, promised her reward.

Mildred Baines had sat down on the rough bunk she had been using and stared hopelessly at Mont. "What a fool I've been," she said desolately.

"I think," Ed said compassionately, "we'd better be starting. Your friends are worried about you, you know."

They started for Salvadore, taking Mont Ferry with them, because Ed was taking no chances on Mont's removing the clothes from his brother and destroying them. He gave Cochita strict instructions to see that Pat was left exactly as he was until the law arrived.

Ed and Mont rode ahead while the two girls brought up the rear. Once Mont said, "Dammit, I've got to talk to Mildred."

They dropped back.

Mont said, "I'm sorry, Mildred. I played a dirty trick on you. This range means a lot to me, and I knew if old man Rice ever got the Leeds place I wouldn't have a chance. I didn't plan to kidnap you or kill anybody. Pat lost his head and killed Hansen, and after that we were in for it. Rags was just asking for it by riding around in them loud clothes of hers, but somehow I always figured she could take care of herself."

"Oh, stop it," Mildred cried. "I don't want to hear any more."

"Come on, Mont," Ed said.

They stopped at the Leeds place, and all of them except Mildred ate breakfast. The Larsens told them Uncle Bill was in jail in Salvadore.

They were seen as they rode into town and a crowd gathered hastily in excitement.

"You'd better explain things, Miss Baines," Ed said. "I'd hate to have to shoot somebody at this stage of the game."

For the first time in their acquaintance, the girl gave Ed a smile. "Still the outlaw."

Bruff Mason and many of the men were still out in the hills looking for the kidnaped girl. Sheriff Baylor came storming out of his office. " So you got 'em, did you, Mont?" he said excitedly.

"No, they got me," Mont said.

In words more biting than she had ever used to Ed or Rags, Mildred told the truth about what had happened, while a look of incredulity settled over the sheriff's face.

"There's another little matter, too," Ed said. "Your deputy, Bruff Mason, and the Buhler boys have been stealing the horses you sent the Ragner boys over the road for, and here is a letter that'll prove it. And we've got Buhler's confession."

"I can swear to that too," Mont said.

"Well, we all sure have been taken in," the sheriff admitted.

THREE DAYS later Ed and Rags were surprised to meet Montana on the street. The big sheep foreman came up with a grin on his face. "Well, cowboy," he said, "it looks like you've come out on top. It kinda grieves me to be pulling out of here leaving you alive and healthy, but I sure do admire the little filly you run with. If she likes you, I reckon I can bear up."

"I'm peaceable," Ed said.

"Well, for a good Injun, you've sure enough been wearing a hell of a lot of war paint."

Ed grinned at him. "What's become of Boone?"

"The trail blazer? Right now I reckon he's blazing a trail into the Packsaddle Mountains like it ain't never been blazed before. Now you answer me a question. I'd like to sort of pick up odds and ends for old man Rice, and I'd like to know what you done with that wagonload of stuff and them two commissary men."

Ed smiled. "The commissary men were blazing a trail out of here long ahead of Daniel Boone. As for the wagon, I don't believe it would do any good."

"That's what I thought," Montana said as he walked away.

Rags looked up curiously. She was wearing a blue dress, and she looked very pretty. "What did happen?" she asked.

"The men got drunk and woke up at Jim Waverly's place. I'm afraid the wagon may have gone over the falls."

"And I missed it," Rags said.

"You didn't miss much."

"They're talking of running you for sheriff, Ed."

"Shall we take it?"

"We? What have I got to do with that?"

"Pardners, ain't we? For life, if I have anything to say about it.

"Somebody's got to keep you out of trouble, don't they?" he teased.

"If only you knew how much I love you," she murmured.

"This has gone far enough," Ed said impatiently. "Come here, you."

The passers-by stopped to look with astonishment at the young couple embracing on a public street, their lips seemingly sealed together in an unbreakable kiss. Then they laughed and passed on.

*He'd never run across anything half so beautiful*

# Runty Roy's Rueful Romance

*HE PROVED IT WASN'T THE SIZE of the man in the fight, but the size of the fight in the man that counted*

AT TWENTY-TWO, Runty Roy Rowlson would rather play his guitar than eat. But he did both equally well, and at the same time ran the north end of the big Triangle Ranch just as if he'd been nine feet tall.

He had yellow hair and blue eyes and a lean brown face. If you didn't consider his

*By Ben Frank*

guitaring, you might say he was normal in most respects. Except for his size. He was a runt—five feet five, a hundred and fifty-five pounds.

Now, to some that may not seem runt size, but out in Dobbin County where men were men and looked it, whiskers and all, the smooth-shaven, soft-spoken Roy seemed kind of puny. And if you stood him between his two brothers, Big Jim and Hi-pockets, who ran the south and west ends of the Triangle, you practically couldn't of seen him at all.

But what there was of this yellow-haired guitar thumper was all muscle and bone and lightning speed. He got along. He carried his weight and asked no favors from anybody. So it didn't worry him no two ways from last Friday's breakfast because he was undersized. Leastwise, not until he met Junie Jordon.

Now, this Junie Jordon at nineteen—there was a girl for you! She was a healthy animal. She had grown up among men and was as rough and tough as they come, but in a nice way. She had bright red hair and grayish-green eyes and a figure. She'd moved with her pa and two older brothers to the J Bar, which lay to the North of the Triangle and on the other side of Dead Injun Canyon. The third day after arriving at her new home, she rode down into the canyon, discovered the deep, pine-shaded pool in Injun Creek, peeled off her clothes and went swimming.

She swam like a seal. She swung her wet, red hair out of her eyes and laughed up at the blue sky, where a black buzzard slowly circled past a woolly white cloud. She felt wonderful. She climbed up on a big granite boulder and stood poised for a moment like a gleaming golden-brown goddess. She was one hundred sixty-seven pounds of loveliness. Barefooted, she stood five feet ten.

Again laughing as only a girl can laugh when she hasn't a care in the world, she put her big strong hands together above her flaming red head and dived. She went into the water like an arrow, scarcely making a ripple. Surfacing, she shook back her hair, swam to shore, dressed and rode back home, hungry enough to eat a seven pound steak.

Never occurred to her that a hard-bitten, hell-for-leather gent by the name of Tarr Taylor had observed her diving exhibition from a rim of rock a quarter of a mile distant. Right then and there Tarr decided that this girl, whoever she was, was exactly the kind of a girl he'd like to tame down for a wife.

But to get back to Runty Roy Rowlson—eventually he heard he had new neighbors on the J Bar and decided he ought to pay them a friendly visit. So one morning, he said to Termite Terry, the grizzled oldster who helped him run his third of the big Triangle, "Let's ride over to see them Jordons."

Termite stuffed his yap full of fine-cut and shook his head. He allowed it was too dad-burned hot for him to do any unnecessary riding. So Runty went alone. Naturally he took his guitar, for it was a lonesome trail across Dead Injun Canyon, and there was nothing like a bit of music to cheer up a lonesome man.

By the time he reached the creek, he was hotter than a six-dollar pistol. He decided to have himself a cooling swim. He rode into the pines that shaded the deep pool, and there he saw a sleek saddle pony chewing on some elderberry leaves. Lying on the grass, her head cradled in the round, soft crook of her left arm, lay a sleeping beauty. Of course, she was Junie Jordon.

Poor Runty, he'd never run across anything half so beautiful in all his life. He sat there in the saddle, hardly believing his eyes. Then he slid to the ground and tiptoed up for a closer view.

SHE WAS a living and breathing girl, no question about that. She was something in a white woolly sweater and a dark riding skirt. Her lips were red, her cheeks a healthy pink. Runty thought for a minute that his heart was going to bust a rib the way it hammered.

Slightly scared, he backed away from her. Then he felt a strong urge for music. Getting his guitar, he set himself down on a small boulder and began to play softly.

Halfway between waking and sleeping, Junie became aware of the music. She

smiled, thinking it was all a very nice dream. Then she came wide awake and sat up with a start. It wasn't no dream, she saw, this yellow-headed cowboy sitting on a rock, strumming a guitar. Her eyes opened round and wide—she'd supposed that nobody ever came to this lonely place—and remembering how she'd been swimming without a stitch of clothes on, she felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. But one look into Runty's innocent blue eyes convinced her that he didn't know about the swimming part of it.

He stopped playing and said, "Howdy."

She wasn't afraid of him. As big and strong as she was, it took more than a mere man to frighten her. She smiled and said, "Howdy."

Then they told each other their names.

"If I'd knowed the Jordons had a girl like you," he said in a hushed voice, "I'd have been over for a visit a long time ago."

"Do you sing as well as play the guitar?" she asked.

Did he sing? He'd been singing ever since he was knee-high to a saddle-horn.

He sang a love song for her, and she leaned back against a pine and closed her eyes. She'd never had anybody sing a love song to her before. All the men she'd ever known were big, rough, tough rannies who hollered and cussed and let their whiskers grow and couldn't sing for sour apples. But this Roy, shaved and clean and gentle looking—well, a girl could dream, couldn't she?

As for Roy, he'd never had any inspiration like her to sing to before. He sang with all his heart, a sad song about a lonesome cowboy who'd lost his sweetie to a bad case of pneumonia, or something.

When he finished, Junie wiped away a stray tear or two and gave him a wavery smile.

"That's beautiful!" she said huskily, and got to her feet.

Now, she was so well proportioned that even then Runty didn't realize how large she was. He didn't realize it until he stood up himself and started to walk up to her and found her eyes way above his. And she hadn't realized exactly how small he was until she found herself looking down at the top of his head.

It hit them both at the same time, how they were about as teamed for size as a dog and a horse. They stared at each other in dismayed astonishment. They didn't know whether to laugh or run in opposite directions. But what they finally did was to look away from each other and turn beet-red.

"Well," Runty said at last, "if you're heading back home, we might as well ride together, huh?"

"Might as well," Junie said in a small voice.

They swung aboard their respective mounts and headed on northward across the canyon. And for the first time in his life, Runty Roy Rowlson wished he'd grown big like the rest of the Rowlson tribe. And Junie thought of the rough and tough men she knew, who were big enough so she didn't make them look ridiculous, and felt like bawling her eyes out.

WHEN they arrived at the J Bar, the Jordons had another visitor—Tarr Taylor. A big, unshaved and uncombed coyote, he squatted in the shade of a cottonwood along with old man Jordon and his two burly, roughneck sons, Jingle and Gurgle. Tarr had learned who the bathing beauty was and where she lived and was making romance in a left-handed way by getting on the good side of the Jordon menfolks. He figured this was the easiest and quickest way to grab Junie for a wife. He had it figured about right, too. Old man Jordon had Junie pretty well under control.

Junie slid to the ground and introduced Runty. The Jordons looked him over, not missing the guitar hanging from the saddle-horn. They greeted him pleasantly enough and invited him to light and make himself to home.

Tarr, however, looked him over coldly. He didn't like Runty, mainly because the little guy was a smart rancher, and honest. Also, he had a certain fearful respect for Runty, who had upon occasion lost his temper and licked a few bullies twice his size.

Not that Tarr figured Runty could lick

him. Tarr had the arm and leg spread of a buckrake and was a mean man in a fight. But he couldn't forget that Runty had two brothers to back him up. Another thing, Tarr didn't much like the idea of Runty, Junie and a guitar riding around together on the lone prairie, but he didn't say nothing.

"Been aiming to come over to see you folks for a month," Runty said in a friendly manner.

"Nice of you to come," old man Jordon said. He was a big, rawboned cuss with a fist-battered nose and thinning white hair. In his day, he'd been a scrapper, but nowadays he turned the family fighting over to his boys. He stood up and offered a hand the size of a grain scoop.

Runty slid to the ground and shook hands. Then the old man squatted back down on his heels and left Runty standing there alone beside Junie.

Looking at them, sawed-off Runty and big Junie, Tarr suddenly snickered. Jingle Jordon grinned and said, "Say, you ain't a very big hombre, are you, Rowlson?"

Junie turned and ran into the house like a scared rabbit. Runty stood there, not knowing what to do or say and feeling about the size of a shriveled persimmion.

"Son," old man Jordon said, grinning, "don't tell me you've got your growth?"

That made Runty furious, but danged if he was going to let on.

"One thing about being small," he said, grinning back at the old coot. "A man don't have so far to fall when he stubs his toe."

That didn't set too well with the old man. He spat and ran a big hand over his red face.

"If I had a runt in my family like you," he growled, "I'd disown him."

Jingle and Gurgle grinned broadly, and Tarr looked downright pleased. Runty managed to hang onto his grin. He couldn't quite understand it, getting riled like this. He'd been kidded about his size all his life, and he hadn't given a hoot. He switched the talk to cattle and horses, but the air remained charged with a certain amount of animosity. So pretty soon he headed back home.

"What's the matter with me?" he asked himself, "getting all steamed up." He knew the answer. It was Junie. Seeming small in her eyes had made him as sensitive as a bad tooth.

HE RODE up to the north ranch house where he lived, and found his brothers, Big Jim and Hi-pockets, waiting for him.

"What's happened to you, kid?" Big Jim asked. "You look like you'd swallowed a handful of horseshoe nails, or something."

But Big Jim had other worries on his mind and didn't press the question. "Tarr Taylor's gettin' mighty careless with his cattle," he said darkly. "Hi-pockets and me chased about forty head of Lazy T stock off the west end of the Triangle this morning."

"Yeah," Hi-pockets muttered. "Runty, what you figure is the best way to handle this?"

"First thing to do," Runty said, "is serve notice on Tarr we won't stand for no range hogging. Then if he don't keep his stuff to home, we'll have a showdown."

Big Jim and Hi-pockets agreed this was the proper thing to do.

"We figured you'd have the right answer, Runty," Jim said.

"I'll serve notice on Tarr right away," Runty promised.

"Good boy!" Hi-pockets said, looking vastly relieved.

After talking over some other ranch business, the two big Rowlsons rode homeward.

"You'd think them two oversized mavericks would do some of the dirty work themselves," old Termite Terry muttered. "But no, they leave it up to you, Runty. Trouble is, you spoiled 'em when you was kids together, fightin' their battles. And you're still spoilin' 'em."

Runty grinned good-naturedly and denied nothing. One thing about Big Jim and Hi-pockets—he could always depend on them to back him up if he needed help. Which was seldom.

Not being the kind to put off doing a disagreeable task, he saddled his horse and headed for the Lazy T first thing the next

morning. Riding down into Dead Injun Canyon, he recalled how he'd stumbled on Junie the day before, and his heart began to beat hard and fast. Of course, she wasn't at the deep pool that early in the morning. Sighing, Runty rode on to the west.

He came up over the rim of rock and met Tarr Taylor heading his way. He pulled up to wait for the big man.

"Glad you came along," he said. "Saved me riding clear over to your place."

Tarr shifted uneasily in the saddle. He wasn't exactly afraid of the little squirt, but he didn't want no trouble with dynamite. "What'd you want to see me for?" he asked.

Runty told him about the Lazy T cattle grazing on Triangle range. Tarr said he didn't believe it. Then he took a good look into Runty's narrowed blue eyes and knew he couldn't get away with denying nothing.

"Must be a hole in my line fence," he muttered.

"Better fix it!" Runty said pointedly.

"I will," Tarr promised.

But he was burned up a-plenty, being told off by a runt. Riding on, he resolved that some day he would quit letting them danged Rowlsons push him around and take 'em apart one at a time. And the one he wanted to take on first was Runty, the blasted undersized singing coyote!

Runty rode back past the swimming hole —but no Junie. He went on home, telling himself he might as well forget her, for she wouldn't look twice at a pinhead like him. But two days later, the girl rode up to the Triangle's north ranch house, looking prettier than ten dollars' worth of orange blossoms.

"Hi, Roy," she said, smiling.

"Hello, Junie," he said huskily.

"Where's your guitar?" she asked. "Came over to hear some more music, if you've got time."

HE SCURRIED into the house for his guitar. When he returned to the corral, he found Junie sitting in the shade of a small oak, talking with old Termite Terry.

Seeing Runty approaching, Termite remembered he had business elsewhere. He knew that three was a crowd. When he and Runty met, the old cow-nurse whispered, "Man alive, what a girl! I bet she could carry her saddle hoss back home if she wanted to. . . ."

Well, Runty sang for her, and between songs they talked and laughed and forgot all their worries.

"I thought maybe you'd come back to see me," she said; and he grinned sheepishly and said, "Didn't suppose you'd want a little guy like me hanging around."

She swung her head, her bright hair flashing in the light like flames, and smiled sadly. "Can I help it if I'm as big as an overgrown ox?"

She was a smart girl, Junie was, taking the blame for the difference in their sizes. It made Runty feel better about the whole business. The next thing he knew, he'd made a date to ride over to see her the next evening.

"Be sure to bring your guitar," Junie said just before she left for home.

The next night, Runty and his guitar went over to the J Bar, the guitar polished and gleaming, Runty dressed up in his Sunday best. It was a mistake, the Sunday clothes and the guitar. Junie knew that the moment she saw her pa and brothers giving Runty a disdainful once-over.

As the evening wore on, they made uncomplimentary cracks about some boys who never grew to man size. And Gurgle brought around a couple hounds that howled when Runty played and sang. Then to make things worse, Tarr Taylor came drifting along and was welcomed heartily.

Shortly after this, Junie's pa pulled out the final joker. "Ain't never been no undersized folks in our family," he said. "Reckon there never will be."

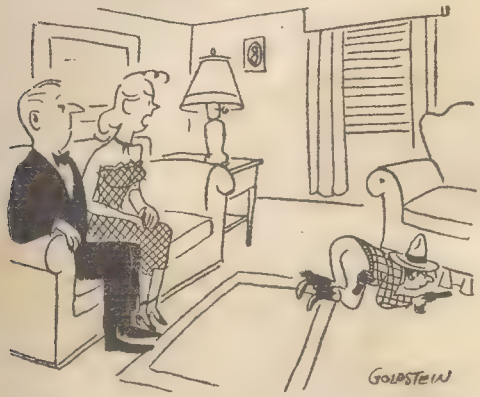
"How do you figure that, Mr. Jordon?" Tarr asked.

"Simple," the old man replied. "Nobody marries my Junie unless he can lick Jingle and Gurgle."

Junie had heard her pa say that before, but she'd never paid no mind to it. She'd never met a boy before who had interested her, but now—

She glanced at Runty. He sat there on the porch steps in the white moonlight, staring glumly at the toes of his boots. She turned her eyes on Tarr and saw the big grin on his ugly face. Suddenly she felt a little sick. She knew somehow that Tarr could lick Jingle and Gurgle if he took a notion. And the way he looked at her sometimes—she shivered slightly.

Then her old man got to his feet, picked up a horseshoe that somebody had left lying on the well curb, took it in his two hands and twisted it into sort of an S. Without a word, he handed the bent shoe to Tarr.




*"You've got my word of honor—there are no rustlers in here!"*

Tarr turned it over a couple times in his big hands; then bent it back into its original shape.

"Come on, Roy," Junie said miserably, "I'll ride part way home with you."

HE HELPED her catch and saddle a horse, and they rode down into Dead Injun Canyon. When they came to the creek, Junie pulled her horse to a halt.

"Looks like I didn't stack up much with your family," he said miserably.

"Who cares whether a man can bend a horseshoes?" she said. "I don't."

He knew she meant it. But he also knew that it was no good making a play for Junie, as long as her family was against him. He liked the girl too well to do anything that might cause her trouble at home.

As for Junie, she knew the sad truth, too. With her pa against Runty, things looked pretty hopeless. And she knew it would be just as well if Runty didn't come to see her again at the J Bar. Yet, she didn't want this to be good-by. Maybe if she didn't quite give up, something would happen.

"We could meet here once in a while and ride together," she said hopefully. "Or just talk. Or you could sing—"

That sounded fine to Runty. Meeting here, they wouldn't be embarrassed by anyone making cracks about her being bigger than he was. They agreed to meet in a couple days.

When the time came, Runty loaded up his guitar and rode to the deep pool in Injun Creek. Junie was waiting for him. The warm summer breeze tumbled her bright hair about her lovely face, and her gray-green eyes were full of dancing lights

"Gee," he said huskily, "you're pretty!"

He sat down beside her on a big flat rock and played and sang some; but mostly they talked. The first thing they knew, the afternoon was over.

"Guess I'd better be going home," Junie said sadly.

Runty gave his guitar one final bleak strum and hung it by the shoulder cord over the saddle-horn. They stood looking at each other. Standing with his heels propped up on a rock, he was practically as tall as she was, he noticed. (Junie had knocked the heels off her riding boots, but Runty didn't know this.)

"Heck!" he thought. "She ain't so big!"

"We're not so mismatched for size," she thought.

They grinned at each other. "Be seeing you day after tomorrow," he said.

"You bet!" she said.

And they swung into their saddles and rode in opposite directions, feeling that the world wasn't such a bad place after all.

There's no telling how long this secret meeting business would have kept up if Junie hadn't got impatient. But regardless of what her pa thought about Runty, Junie knew what she wanted. She wanted this Runty Roy lad, but there was one disquieting catch to it. He didn't seem to

want her the way she wanted him—forever and ever.

She pondered this discouraging fact by the hour. She even lost considerable sleep trying to figure out why he didn't get down to some serious romancing. She even went to town and got some books and magazines about love and romance and read them searchingly, hoping to learn how a girl breaks down a boy's resistance. The horrible truth is, Runty hadn't yet kissed her. Not even once!

WELL, AT LAST she read a story that seemed to fit her case. It was about a boy who shied away from a strong, healthy girl because he thought she didn't need him to look after her. But one day she fell off the front porch and broke her ankle. This boy carried her around and waited on her like a slave, and the next thing you knew, he'd popped the question.

But Junie wasn't nobody's fool. She knew that whatever she did to make herself seem helpless to Runty would have to be done mighty cleverly, or she'd lose him for good. She thought about falling off her horse, but the way she could ride—well, she gave up that idea immediately. Maybe falling over a cliff, or—but she couldn't think of anything that seemed practical.

She thought and schemed vainly. Likely if she'd known that his reason for making no romantic moves was that he didn't want to get her in dutch with her family, she would have abandoned her plan of having him rescue her from some mishap. But Junie didn't know.

In the meantime, old man Jordon got to wondering why Junie did so much riding around the countryside. Also, her reading all those love books— So one un-busy day, he decided to find out.

"Boys," he said to Jingle and Gurgle, "just for the heck of it, let's see where Junie's riding to."

They swung into leather and trailed the unsuspecting girl. When they came to the rim of the canyon, they left their horses and eased down among the boulders where they could see. They watched her until she disappeared among the pines that bordered the creek. Then they observed a horseman entering the timber from the south, but he was so far away they couldn't make out who he was.

"That's a purty lonely place down there," the old man said worriedly. "Wouldn't want Junie to run into no trouble."

They hurried back to their horses and headed for the switch-back trail that led into the canyon. Before they reached the pines, they heard the guitar music. Then they knew what she was up to.

Looking relieved, the old man pulled his cayuse to a stop. "It's that little runt from the Triangle. Don't have to worry none about him doing Junie any harm. Reckon she could turn him over her knee and spank him if she took a notion."

"Pa," Gurgle said, scowling, "you wouldn't want that little peewee for a son-in-law, would you?"

"Why, I guess there's no danger of that happenin'."

"You can't never tell," Jingle spoke up. "When a gent can play a gee-tar and sing—and Junie reading about love!"

"Now, boys," the old man said, "you know blamed well that that little squirt can't lick neither one of you. Junie knows she can't marry up with nobody who can't lick—"

At that moment, there came a great splash, and Junie began to yell, "Help, help!"

The old man and his boys made a run through the trees for the creek. They arrived just in time to see Runty Roy Rowlson dive from the top of a large boulder. They scrambled upon the boulder and saw Junie in the water below, floundering around and sputtering like she couldn't swing a stroke. Runty was struggling to reach her and shouting, "I'll save you, Junie!"

The old man started to remove his boots.

"Take it easy, Pa," Gurgle said. "You know Junie can swim like a fish."

"Maybe she's took a cramp."

"It don't look like no cramp to me," Jingle muttered darkly. "It looks to me like she's puttin' on a act."

WHICH was exactly what Junie was doing. Standing on the boulder, listening to Runty play the guitar, she'd thought how easy it would be to slip into the creek. Then it hit her like a bolt out of the blue. Why not pretend to fall into the creek and let Runty rescue her? Then he'd think she needed a man like him around to take care of her.

So she'd backed up a step and toppled like a ton of bricks into the deep water.

Poor Runty was scared to death. He didn't take off his boots or anything. He dropped his guitar and dived, knocking the wind out of him and almost breaking his neck. He could swim, after a fashion, but with his boots and clothes on, he felt like a first cousin to a sinking ship. By the time he reached Junie, he was in no shape to rescue anybody. And Junie, of course, had to make her drowning look convincing, so she made a wild grab for him, like a drowning person would do, and pulled him under.

Runty liked to cashed in his chips right then and there. But he had presence of mind enough to know he had to break her death grip, or else; and even if it made him sick to do it, he hauled off and hit her on the point of the chin. That broke her hold, all right. In fact, it knocked her silly, and it's a wonder they didn't both drown.

But he managed to turn her over on her back and started for shore. He hadn't towed her a yard before he knew he'd never make it But he kept fighting. Even when he went under for the last time, he kept fighting to keep her above water. But he went down deeper and deeper, and suddenly everything turned black.

The next thing he knew, he was safely on shore and Junie was there beside him, smiling faintly at him.

"Thanks, Roy," she said. "Thanks for saving my life."

He didn't know how he'd done it, but he suddenly felt fine. He was about to tell her the pleasure was all his when there came a batch of hoarse laughter from above them, and old man Jordon and his two boys came sliding down to where they were lying.

"Runty," the old man said, laughing fit to kill, "it's a danged good thing Junie was in that there creek with you, or you'd never made it."

"Yah, haw!" Gurgle bellowed. "For a minute, Junie, I thought you was goin' to let the little sucker drown."

Runty stared at Junie and suddenly knew the awful truth. She had saved him, instead of him saving her.

Just why she'd done this to him, he hadn't any idea, but he did know he felt like a fool. He stumbled to his feet, staggered over to his horse, and somehow managed to climb into the saddle. He rode away like a whipped pup, with the laughter of the Jordon boys and their old man ringing in his red ears.

He got clear home before he realized he'd left his guitar up there on the boulder. Likely he wouldn't have missed it then if old Termite Terry hadn't asked him where it was. So he wheeled his horse around and rode back to the creek.

Well, poor Junie was still there. She'd told her pa and brothers to go on home, that she'd come when she got good and ready. So they'd gone on, and she'd just sat there, facing the creek, broken-hearted and ashamed and wishing she was dead.

"Maybe if I could only cry," she thought, "I'd feel better."

But she hurt too much inside to cry, so she just sat there, hating herself and staring vacantly into space until a sound make her turn. And there was Runty, who'd come back for his guitar.

JUNIE LEAPED to her feet with an idea of running and hiding. But the loose stones rolled under her heel-less boots, and she stumbled and fell. She fell to her knees, ripping off about six square inches of hide from them. The pain was the last straw. She covered her face with her hands and bawled like a baby.

Now there was just one thing for Runty to do, and he did it. He leaped to the ground, ran to her and took her in his arms.

"Junie," he said, "don't cry like that. Everything's going to be all right."

"Nothing's ever going to be all right," she sobbed.

"That's crazy talk," he said. "I'm going

to see your pa. I'll tell him how we feel about each other."

"It wouldn't do any good," she said wearily.

She went down to the creek and washed the blood and dirt off her skinned knees. Then she splashed water over her tear-stained face and combed the tangles out of her hair. By then, she'd finished with her crying. She came back to where Runty stood and gave him a sad, quivery smile.

"Good-by, Roy," she said. "Good luck!"

She swung up into the saddle and left him standing there, feeling as if the world had come to an end. After a while he climbed up on the boulder and found his guitar. Suddenly, he hated the darned thing and was about to toss it into the creek. But at that moment, he heard Junie yell.

Upon reaching the edge of the timber, Junie had come face to face with Tarr Taylor.

Tarr was somewhat battered and bruised. He'd made up his mind to quit dilly-dallying around and get down to the business of making Junie his wife. So he'd ridden over to the J Bar and stated his intentions to the old man.

"Boys," old Jordon had said to Jingle and Gurgle, "take him on, one at a time, and we'll see if he's man enough for our Junie."

Tarr licked Jingle first. Then, after a short rest, he licked Gurgle.

"Well, son, you've passed our test," old Jordon said. "Now all you got to do is show Junie who's the boss. If you can do that—"

All of which is howcome Junie found herself facing the battered and bruised Tarr Taylor.

Tarr didn't beat about the bush. "I just got through lickin' your mangy brothers," he said. "Guess the next thing to do is give you a kiss."

"Guess again," Junie said, heeling her horse.

But Tarr had expected a move like this. The next thing she knew, he'd swept her out of the saddle and had lowered her roughly to the ground. He leaped down beside her.

"I been aimin' to kiss you for—"

She hauled off and hit him a flat-handed blow that would have knocked an ordinary man for a loop. But Tarr just laughed and grabbed her.

"Want to play, huh?" he said. "That suits me fine!"

"Let go of me, you big ape!" she yelled furiously.

She tore away from him and ran into the timber. She wasn't running because she was afraid of him. She just wanted to get hold of a good stout stick and teach him how to behave around a lady. But she'd taken less than a dozen steps when he closed in on her.

"Just one little kiss," he said, grinning wickedly.

That was when Runty Roy came charging along the trail. It never occurred to him that Junie could take care of herself. With a snarl, he lifted his guitar and brought it crashing down on Tarr's big ugly head.

SOMEWHAT dazed, Tarr let go of the girl and faced around. He clawed the broken guitar from around his neck and glared down at Runty.

"You lookin' for trouble?" he asked.

"Yeah!" Runty gritted, and he lowered his head and rammed Tarr in the stomach.

Tarr doubled over with a groan, and Runty let him have two uppercuts that jolted the big man from head to toe. Tarr reached blindly for his adversary, but Runty ducked between the widespread, wobbly legs and upset him so hard he bounced two feet high.

Slowly Tarr stumbled to his feet. He didn't like this kind of hit-and-run fighting. Runty Rowlson was greased lightning, and Tarr knew it. Trying to get his hands on Runty was like trying to take hold of a whistling bullet.

But Tarr didn't have time to do much worrying or thinking. Runty ducked in, hammered him, and ducked back. He came in again, slashing right, left, right, and was gone. Years ago when they were kids, his brothers had made him so mad a time or two that he'd licked them, so Runty had had considerable experience in fighting someone twice his size. He knew all the angles.

As for Junie, she just stood leaning against a pine, watching, her eyes the size of saucers. She'd never seen anything like it —a small man whittling a big lug down to his size by ducking and dodging, twisting and turning and landing punches where they did the most damage.

Presently she saw Tarr stumble to his knees. She saw him try to get back on his feet, then sprawl forward with a moan. Tarr Taylor had taken a gosh-awful beating. Suddenly she felt like lifting her arms to the heavens and shouting for joy. But she waited for Runty to make the first move.

Grinning faintly, he began to brush the dirt and pine-needles off his clothes. He'd scarcely been touched by Tarr's wild haymakers.

"Roy," Junie cried, "come home with me and fight—"

"I wouldn't want to see my boys take a lickin' like that," a voice spoke up hoarsely.

Turning, they saw old man Jordon moving out from behind a tree. His face was pale, his eyes kind of frightened. After Tarr had left the J Bar, the old man had got to worrying about what might happen if Junie lost her temper. Not wanting his future son-in-law to be maimed for life, he'd ridden into the canyon and had arrived in time to see enough of the fight to scare him half to death.

"Son," he said, holding out a trembling hand to Runty, "just forget I said anything about a gent having to lick my two boys before he can marry Junie...."

Funny thing, at the wedding nobody even thought about Junie being five inches taller than Runty. With him wearing built-up boots and her wearing slippers without heels—well, they made as handsome a couple as ever trod a church aisle to the tune of "Lohengrin." Incidentally, Runty had bought himself a new guitar and sang a song or two for the wedding party.

"For a two-fisted hellion," old man Jordon proudly told the preacher, "that boy is a mighty purty singer!"

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*Coming up in the next issue*

## Rawhide and Calico

***All the Age-Old Cattleman Traditions Were Broken When Ranchman Doane Cavigan Sided a Nester — the Beautiful Woman Who Dared Defy the Countryside Boss***

**A Magazine-Length Novel**

**By ROD PATTERSON**

## Woman on Willow Creek

***He Had Loved This Girl Who Had Turned Him in. Now He Would Teach Her the Meaning of Hate and Fear***

**A Novelette**

**By RAY GAULDEN**

## The Bet Cure

***If He Did What Her Dad Said, She'd Never Speak to Him. If He Didn't, Pop'd Throw Him off the Range***

**A Short Story**

**By S. OMAR BARKER**

***AB CURRY'S LIFE SURE looked dismal; then everything started happening right after he began noticing Jennie***

# CHORING for

AB CURRY wearily finished the last of his chores, pegged his saddle at the back of the barn and started at a slow pace toward the front, a tall man, gaunted a little by all he had been through, but his jaw still hard and his brown eyes quietly stubborn.

Near the front, he stopped. Jennie Mahon, the hired girl, was there, being deviled by young Tom Brant. He had her against a wall, grinning. Jennie was silently, desperately trying to get away from him. She was thin and young, drab in a cutdown dress Tom's mother had given her, a quiet girl who seldom spoke to Ab.

"Let her go, Tom," Ab said.

The boy turned to look at him, lip curling. He was scarcely twenty, a wild, reckless kid.

"Any business of yours, saddle bum?" he demanded.

"Guess not. Still, like I said, let her go."

Tom Brant stepped toward him. It gave the girl a chance to get away. Oddly, she didn't take it.

"Beat it, you threadbare tramp," Tom ordered arrogantly. "Or would you like the habit of not eating again? You've got a good thing here. If you want to hang onto it, keep your nose out of my affairs!"

Ab grunted wryly. Choring for board wasn't exactly his idea of a bed of roses. Tom's father, old Ike Brant, drove him like he was drawing full puncher's pay. Still, it was something. It was more than a lot of good men he knew had been able to tie onto in this run of mean times.

Then he looked at the girl again. She lived down the road with her old father and worked here days. Jennie had it even worse than himself. He didn't have anybody dependent on him. He could walk away if he wanted to.

"Boy, she's made it plain she doesn't like you bothering her," Ab said. "Leave her alone."

It was more of a plea than a command. Tom swore, jumping forward, swinging a reckless fist. Ab tried to duck, but knuckles ripped his cheek. Tom danced back. He threw another punch.

Ab caught it on a forearm, moving in on Tom Brant. He slammed a blow at his

*Jennie threw herself at him like a hurricane in skirts*

# BOARD

By FRANK P. CASTLE

middle, and heard the boy lose his wind in an agonized gasp. Tom floundered, jaw wide open. Ab poised a fist. He could put the boy to sleep easy.

Jennie Mahon made a soft, pleading sound. Ab heard it. He wrapped both arms around Tom, jerked his feet off the ground, flailed him until his head snapped and threw him bodily away. Tom landed hard on his side.

Ab and Jennie watched silently. Tom struggled to his knees, then his feet. He wavered over to the door, through it, and started across the yard.

"He'll go get a gun!" Jennie said.

"Doubt it. Tom's full of foolishness, but he'd hardly try that."

"You're the foolish one," the girl said with sudden heat. "He'll talk to his mother, now, and she'll see you're fired. Why did you interfere?"

Ab stared at her, surprised. He hadn't exactly expected gratitude, but it took him a little off balance to have her talk like this.

"I can stand Tom's deviling because I've got to," Jennie said. "But you'll lose your job, and it'll be on my conscience for having caused it."

She was kind of pretty, he thought, in spite of her thinness.

"Never heard you talk so much before," Ab said. "Even when you're scolding me, it makes nice listening."

The twilight wasn't so thick yet that he couldn't see the color suffusing her face and throat. She bent, grabbed a bucket and scurried off toward the house.

Ab went on to what had been the Brant bunkshack in better times. Now he had it to himself.

He washed up, grimacing as he saw the small cut Tom had opened under his eye. Then he raised a hand automatically to his shirt pocket. But it was empty.

Ab sighed. A cigarette would taste good. However, his deal with Ike Brant hadn't included smoking. Just his meals and a place to sleep—and enough work for two men, to earn them.

Ike was canny, close-fisted. When it came to any deal, he could always squeeze out a profit for himself. Which was probably the reason he was solvent when so many ranchers were broke.

Choring for board was a tough thing for Ab Curry to bear. Three years ago, he had owned grass, hired men, had money in the bank. Then beef prices had started their steep slide to bedrock and below. Today, you could trade for cattle and maybe clear a little. Try to raise them and it was a dead loss all the way. Ab knew. It had broken him, finding out.

He dipped into his warbag and brought out his gun. It was a Colt .44, a good iron. As long as a man could hang onto saddle and gun, the way Ab saw it, he still owned his self-respect. And he had hung onto his, in spite of frequent temptations to pawn them.

He put the .44 in his waistband and pulled his shirt over it. Jennie could have been right. Tom might make some wild, unpredictable play with a gun. He headed across the yard to the house for his supper.

TO HIS relief, there was no talk about the scuffle in the barn. Tom ignored him, absorbed in thoughts that seemed to give him considerable satisfaction. His mother, a stout, shrill-voiced woman, spouted county gossip. Ike Brant, a lanky, narrow-faced man, shoveled food in his mouth and paid no attention.

Ab ate fast. He had to. When Ike was through, supper was over.

Jennie, he supposed, had left. She usually did as soon as supper was on the table, riding an old pinto the five miles home.

Ike shoved back his chair, tamped tobacco in a cob pipe and blew smoke at Ab.

"Come Monday," he said, "we'll clear the bench and shove what we gather down toward the washes. I've got a dicker working for two hundred steers, all young stuff. They'll be trailing in next week."

"Two hundred head will graze the bench to grass roots before August," Ab said.

"They ain't going to stay there," Ike said. "I've been squeezing Pop Heathcote for a share and share use of his hill grass. Finally got the old coot where he's ready to deal. I'll pick up those steers at eight or nine. Come October, I figure to trade them for twice as many. In a couple of years, the way I'll keep turning them over, that herd ought to number a thousand, easy."

Easy wasn't the word for it, Ab thought. He had done some wistful looking at that prime grass up beyond the bench. Heathcote, a town band leader, had been saddled with the acreage by a defaulted note. If a savvy stockman could get a foothold there, with open hill range on westward for expansion, given any kind of break—and prices had to turn up again some time—he could build a right good spread in five or six years.

But wishing wasn't any good unless there

was cash to back it, and Ike Brant had the cash, not Ab Curry. Ike just couldn't lose. He would have no risk to speak of and virtually no expense. He wouldn't even have to pay Ab, who would do most of the work of getting those steers fat.

Ike looked at his son, turning sour. "Thought I told you to drag the bottoms today for strayed stock. I sure didn't see any evidence that you put in much time at it."

"Aw, it was too hot. And Monday's soon enough," Tom answered sullenly.

AB LEFT them snapping at each other and went outside. There was bitterness in him. Night and a silent, empty bunkshack, himself sodden with fatigue, turn in early so he could roll out at first light—and for what? To build a herd that would eventually put cash in the pockets of that lazy, good-for-nothing kid.

He had thought occasionally of the other way out, the way that involved use of his gun. Ab had managed to keep such thinking to a minimum, before. He wasn't too sure he could do it now.

Then he entered the bunkshack and sensed the girl's presence in the dark even before she spoke.

"Don't make a light," Jennie whispered breathlessly. "I waited to tell you something. Tom didn't speak to his ma. And he won't. You'll not lose your job."

Ab could see her, silhouetted against the window. He reached out and gripped her arms.

"How do you know that, Jennie?" he demanded. "You talked to him, didn't you? He promised he'd keep still. And you must have promised him something in return."

She did not reply. Ab felt anger. He shook her.

"I don't need any girl to talk for me. You think I want this cheap job that much."

"You're hurting me." Jennie twisted away from him. "Sure, it's a cheap job. But it keeps your feet on the ground. And you're going to start moving again one of these days, maybe faster and farther than you ever dreamed, because of what you're going through.

"Listen, do you think I'd have bothered for just any down-at-the-heels puncher? I've been watching you, and I didn't want petty spite to put you on the road now, when you belong here, because things are bound to get better for you soon. And you had to think bad of me."

"Jennie, I'm sorry—" Ab reached for her again.

He touched her briefly, but she slid away, heading for the door. "Try to do anything for a man, and he always gets the wrong notion. Good night, Abner Curry!"

He heard her run across the yard, and then the hoofbeats of her horse faded down the road.

Ab found his bunk in the dark, and sat there. He plowed fingers through his thick shock of hair. His hands tingled where they had been in contact with Jennie.

He might have spent his time to better advantage these past few months, Ab thought. She had been here all the time.

Then he snorted at himself. A flat-broke puncher, choring for board, had no business getting hopeful notions about a girl.

Still, she had faith in him. Maybe it was time for him to be getting some faith, too. And Jennie might be right. Things could be about to take a turn for the better, for him. And if they did—

He shied from carrying that thought to a conclusion. But he did do some pleasant planning about how he could show his gratitude, tomorrow.

NEXT MORNING, Saturday, he had all the chores to handle, with Tom late abed. And Ike was more than ordinarily crusty today, finding fault with everything he did. Ab had to keep his jaw clamped tight so he wouldn't answer back.

At ten, he harnessed the surrey. Mrs. Brant came out and sagged the rear springs. Tom appeared, yawning, and took the reins. Ike climbed in beside his wife. They rolled out. Ab rode along behind, eating dust.

They passed the Mahon place, where wash flapped on a line. Jennie worked for Mrs. Brant only five days a week.

They reached Tontero shortly after noon. Ike handed Ab the list of things to pick up

at the Union Mercantile, then headed for the auction corral, where the county's ranch owners gathered on Saturday. Tom helped his mother down, and she started on her round of calls. Tom swaggered over to the Gem Saloon.

Ab frowned as he watched the boy push through the Gem's swinging doors. He had heard talk about Tom bucking Phil Greet's poker game in the back. Likely losing. He was the kind of pigeon Greet loved to pluck. And if the boy ever slung at him the kind of rash talk he used on everybody else, Tom would be in for bad trouble.

Ab shrugged. It was no problem of his. Still, he remembered one puncher he'd seen after Greet's toughs had mashed his face. Ab wouldn't wish that kind of thing for anybody.

Ab got in line at the Union, assembled groceries, carried them out and stowed them in the surrey.

Now it was past one. He went hunting for some way to make a little money.

He found it at Livermore's feed warehouse. Livermore had in a carload of barley that he wanted sacked. Ab stripped to his waist, grabbed a shovel and started in. At three cents a sack, working like a demon, filling and tying, he managed by sunset to make three dollars.

"Come back tomorrow and finish off the car," Livermore invited. "It beats puncher's pay!"

Ab nodded soberly. Maybe he would, even though his back felt broken.

He headed along the main street again, with a wistful look at the lights in the Gem, thinking of a nickel schooner of cold beer. But he resisted the temptation and stopped at the Union once more.

There were some female fixings on a back counter. He fingered several items, awkwardly, did some dickering and bought a thing the lady clerk called a stole—like a shawl, sort of, dark blue wool, fringed, with silver thread running through it in a pretty pattern.

That cost him two and a half. He walked out with it wrapped under his arm, feeling foolish and yet oddly exhilarated. Four bits were left in his pocket. Lights were on at the Masonic Hall for the dance held there every Saturday night—admission fifty cents, ladies free.

He stopped at Ah Wong's restaurant, washed a big sink of dirty dishes and ate the meal he got in exchange. This really wasn't necessary. Ike had arranged for him to charge up to a dime's worth of crackers and cheese at the Union, on Saturdays.

It was now dark, a warm, bland, moonless Arizona night, just the kind of night to put pleasant notions in a man's head, if there was also a girl in it. Livermore had said things were looking up a little. Maybe the turn was starting. Maybe he would know the feeling again of his own grass under his feet, his own brand on fat beef—and somebody to share things with him.

He snorted at himself for building so much from so little. Still, with somebody believing in him, nothing seemed impossible.

JENNIE MAHON always brought her father to town Saturday afternoon, leaving him at the auction corral while she did her small errands. Bad times had broken him, too, and this was the only pleasure left in his life, so that he usually insisted on lingering until rather late.

Ab walked fast, afraid for a moment that he might have drawn it too fine. Then he saw the ramshackle Mahon wagon, the bony nag that pulled it, and Jennie's father, perched on the corral fence in wistful talk of better days with a couple of his own kind.

Ab gave the old man a hello, and George Mahon let himself stiffly down.

"Ab Curry, ain't it?" he said, peering. "Boy, you've thinned till I hardly know you."

"Kind of looking for Jennie," Ab said offhandedly. "You got any notion where she might be?"

"Sure have," Mahon answered. "Over at the Masonic Hall. She told me plain not to plan on heading home till midnight or later. Which is plenty all right. Going back to sit another week on our stretch of greasewood and gravel ain't my idea of anything to pleasure me."

Ab gulped inwardly. "She's going to the dance?"

"That's it. Some fellow has woke up to the fact that she's the prettiest, sweetest girl in the whole county." Then Mahon cleared his throat apologetically. "Ab, you got the makings? Seems like I've been a year of Sundays without a smoke!"

"Sorry, old-timer," Ab said. He plucked the four-bit piece from his pocket. "Here, buy yourself a sack. A beer, too. Set them up for your friends."

He left Mahon cackling in delight. Jennie's father would get plenty of pleasure from tobacco and a drink, and Ab wouldn't, not now.

Well, he thought, it served him right. Life didn't go the way he had dreamed. Miracles didn't happen to get a man up off his back. A few kind words from a girl just couldn't be stretched into what he had been thinking.

He cut across the main street, planning to pick up his horse and head home. Chores didn't stop on Sunday, and he was plenty tired. He needed sleep.

Then he saw Jennie, on the corner below the Masonic Hall. She started to move away, he called, and she paused reluctantly.

She wore an old, faded dress, but in it she looked mighty pretty. It left her arms and shoulders mostly bare. Ab remembered the stole, and shucked it out of its wrappings.

"Something I thought maybe you'd like," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Why, Ab, it's beautiful!"

She draped it over her shoulders. He was surprised to see the glint of tears in her eyes.

Jennie said, "I could hug you, Ab Curry, right here before everybody."

"Better save that for your date at the dance," he told her, feeling stiff and resentful toward the fellow, whoever he might be.

"Who told you about that? And anyway, it looks like he isn't coming."

Ab couldn't believe that. Nobody would make a date with a girl as pretty as Jennie was tonight, and then stand her up.

Nobody, save one certain arrogant, spoiled pup.

"Tom is the one who's supposed to be taking you," he said, beginning to scowl. "And he's letting you stand outside here, waiting."

"I didn't say he was the one, Ab Curry. And don't you go making it any of your business."

He grabbed hold of her arm. "You made a deal with him—a date tonight so he wouldn't go squalling to his ma about that scuffle we had."

SHE JERKED back. The stole slipped from her shoulders. A vagrant puff of wind blew it into the street. Jennie ran after it. She picked it up, soiled now with street filth, and the tears spilled fast down her cheeks.

"The only real present I ever got in my whole life—and it's ruined!"

Ab chewed his lip, a maelstrom of wild thoughts in him. "Don't mind, Jennie, I'll get you another one. But I can't have you doing a thing like that for me."

She said, head down, "He's just a young and foolish boy, Ab. No real harm in him—"

"He's a spoiled punk, thinking Ike Brant's money gives him the right to do anything he pleases," Ab snapped. "And

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# RANGE RIDERS NEVER QUIT

**By S. Omar Barker**

**Raw bronc. Loose load.**
**Cargo shifted. Man throwed.**
**Raw bronc. Second round.**
**Stirrup lost. Man aground.**
**Raw bronc. Same guy.**
**Round three. Throwed high.**
**Round four. About time.**
**Bronc ridden! End rhyme!**

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he's not going to have any more chances to bother you, Jennie. You're quitting that job with Mrs. Brant right away—tonight."

"That's silly talk," Jennie said wearily. "I need my job even more than you need yours."

"There's other things a girl can do, like waiting table at the depot lunchroom—"

"You think I haven't tried for a job there?" Jennie cried. "Each Saturday I go and ask, and everywhere else, too. I've got a promise of a place at the depot. There's a girl who's going to get married and leave. But not until October."

"Nearly four months," Ab said. "And I heard Mrs. Brant talking once that she pays you twelve dollars a month. So if you could have about fifty dollars, it would be enough for you to make out."

"Oh, sure," Jennie said. "Just ask anybody for that much money, times like these, and they'd hand it right over."

"Not anybody. Me," Ab said. "I'll give you the fifty dollars. You go to where I left your pa and wait. I'll be there soon as I can pick it up."

He left her, walking fast. He went to his horse, stripped off the saddle and carried it to Pete Carmody's pool hall. Pete ran a loan business on the side.

Ab put his saddle on the counter, laid his gun beside it and said, "I want fifty bucks."

"Who doesn't?" Carmody said. "I like you, Ab, but I just couldn't make my money back on those."

"Call it a loan, then," Ab begged. "If you have to sell them and lose on the deal, I'll make it up to you some way, Pete. I've got to have the money, even if it's necessary to go after it, using the gun another way."

Carmody sighed. "Guess I'd better take temptation out of your way, then. But you're one boy I was betting would hang onto his gear."

AB PUT the fifty in his jacket pocket and returned to the auction corral. Ike had no saddles for loaning out. He'd have to borrow one somewhere else if he was to hang onto his job. But he'd worry about that after making sure Jennie was safe from Tom's pawings.

Mrs. Brant, weeping hard, was with Jennie.

She explained to Ab hurriedly. Tom had taken a seat in the back room of the Gem and, after a losing streak, had accused Phil Greet of using crooked cards. He had barely managed to escape from the saloon with his hide on. Greet was hunting the boy, and Tom was still in town, frantically dodging.

Ike had ridden out to close the deal for those two hundred steers. Somebody had brought word to Mrs. Brant, and she had hurried to the office of Tontero's marshal. He wasn't in. It looked like her son couldn't miss a bad beating.

"Which'll serve him right," Ab growled. "He's long overdue a lesson of that kind."

"Like I told you before, he's just a foolish boy," Jennie said quietly. "Maybe there's the makings of a man in him—the kind of a man you are, Ab."

"I learned the hard way, Jennie."

"Not as hard as this," she told him. "Greet will half kill Tom. It could ruin him."

She was right. Greet stayed in business only by brutal manhandling of those who questioned his way of playing poker. Ab remembered the puncher whose face had been marked for life.

Still, he didn't like being nudged to help the boy. Then he realized Jennie wasn't nudging him at all. She was comforting Mrs. Brant again, as though certain of what he would do.

Ab walked over and had a look along the main street. It was quiet. Greet would pick a darker and more secluded place, he thought. Ab figured the number of such places around Tontero, and began investigating them. The second spot he looked was the one.

They had cornered Tom at the railroad loading pens. He was crowded into a corner, nowhere to run. Greet and two of his toughs were closing in, with some barflies and jobless punchers watching. The headlight of an idle switch engine showed the scene plainly.

Tom spoke out, voice taut, "I'll say it again. You used marked cards against me!"

"That's all you'll be saying for quite a

while," Phil Greet told him. "You're going to be shy your teeth before we're through with you."

"Try it, and you'll swallow some, too," Tom said.

Spunk in the boy, Ab thought. Too bad it didn't go with some judgment.

Greet was a squat, bulky man, full of bull strength. He headed at Tom from the front, hand on a beltgun, obviously meaning to do most of the battering himself. His two toughs slanted in from either side.

Tom had his fists up. He had no gun on him, and undoubtedly it was a good thing. He couldn't ever match Greet on the draw. Ab thought of his own iron, hung on a peg at Carmody's. Then he ran at Greet from behind. One of the barflies yelled a warning, but too late. Ab hooked an arm about the squat man's neck, jerked his head back, and at the same time drove a knee hard at his spine.

Greet howled with pain. Ab released him, and he landed on his face in the dust. One of those toughs swerved and jumped Ab. The other one closed with Tom.

Ab saw Tom run into a fist and crash on his back, then take a kick in the ribs. The boy rolled and scrambled up, plowing right in again. Ab felt crunching pain over his heart, skinned knuckles on a bristly chin, and slammed his man against the fence. He whirled hurriedly toward Greet.

The gambler was lunging up, jerking at his gun. Ab slugged him in his ample belly, and Greet sat down, hugging himself. His gun was on the ground. Ab kicked it into darkness, with no time to bend and grab. The fellow he had hammered against the fence was back again. He ground in a fist over Ab's kidneys, making him grunt with pain. Then he grappled, clawing and ripping.

THEN SUDDENLY, those barflies were crowding around, yelling and scrambling for bills fluttering on the ground. Ab's jacket pocket had been ripped out, spilling the fifty dollars Carmody had given him.

He bucked off his antagonist, and tried to stop them. It was no use. They were like famished hawks diving at scurrying chicks. And now both of those toughs rushed at him, with Greet behind Ab and starting to get up again.

Tom scrambled out of the dust and climbed the back of one of the toughs, clawing and pounding. Ab slugged the man in the belly, also, wheeled on the other and threw a pile-driver right that knocked him flat and left him there. But Greet hit him from behind and Ab crashed down.

He took a stomping boot in the chest; then a hurricane in skirts hit Greet. It was Jennie, pummeling and scratching.

Ab crawled erect, pulled her out of the way, and mashed Greet's nose with a wild swing. The gambler grabbed at his face and staggered away, moaning. Ab sat down, too spent to stand, just as Ike Brant arrived, spurring a lathered horse.

Tom's antagonist, too, took to his heels. Tom wore a battered, unbelieving grin. "Gosh, Ab, we licked them!"

Ab hurt all over. He glared at the boy. "You trouble-making whelp! I ought to lick you—"

He caught himself. He had to give Tom some credit. He had fought his share. But Ab remembered why there had been a fight. He remembered his lost money, and he turned his glare on Ike.

"I'm fed up with you Brants. Yes, and so's Jennie. We'll make out, even if we've got to chew boot. And you know what you can do with our jobs, you—you—"

"Mean, rawhiding miser?" Ike suggested, scowling.

"That's it," Ab snapped. Mrs. Brant hurrying up, yelped angrily. Ike showed an unexpected, tired smile.

"Well, I'm that, and more," he said. "It took me ten years of fighting hard times to stand on my feet, and I guess I never got over them. You're luckier, Ab. You've only had three."

Lucky? Ab stared bitterly.

Ike said, "I mean it. You'll understand, one of these days. And you can't quit me, Ab, not just when I'm moving that new herd in. I—I guess we'll have to figure out a new deal. I'll give you a fifth interest in those steers."

Ab gulped and opened his mouth to say yes, quick, before Ike could change his mind. But Jennie put a hand on his arm and squeezed, hard.

"A half, Ike," he heard himself saying. "A full one-half, or no deal."

Ike snorted. "Boy, you're crazy. I might go a fourth—"

Jennie squeezed harder. She was looking at Tom, who was strutting as he hauled erect that dazed fellow Ab had downed, and booted him on his way.

"One-half, Ike," Ab said. "And something else. You give me Tom to help. Let him get thirty a month, and see that he's got to live on it."

Suddenly Ike grinned. "It's a deal!"

"Tom, you dust for home," Ab said, his voice hard. "You roll out at first light, ready to work, or I drag you out. Move!"

Mrs. Brant squealed in protest, and Tom looked mutinous for a moment. Then he showed an abrupt smile.

"Sure, Ab. Fighting men like us—we've got to stick together."

It had a callow ring, but he walked away like a man, with a respectful nod to Jennie. His mother was still clamoring a protest. Tom told her to hush.

He'd do, Ab thought. He'd find work, like fighting, was more to a man's taste than the foolishness in which he had been indulging himself.

Now Ab felt a little shy, alone with Jennie as Ike went to his wife. But Jennie's hand was still on Ab's arm. She had guided him right so far, and he had the heady feeling he couldn't ever fail, with her beside him.

He started talking fast. "Guess I'll have to live at your place for a while, till I can get far enough ahead to build a nice house in the hills—"

"Like I said before—do something for a man," Jennie murmured, "and he always gets a notion."

"But the right one, this time!" Ab said, drawing her close to him.

The eager surrender of her lips told him he was absolutely correct.

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——*Fred Harvey*

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# Canyon Blockade

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

SOMETHING about this deal was off key, something Hal Merrow couldn't lay a finger on. Maybe it was the deep-cored anxiety which Doc Fowler's eyes windowed, a fear kept under tight control.

Merrow moved over to the window facing the saloons and honkytonks of Bighorn Street, ostensibly to have a better light for his final reading of Fowler's assignment-of-practice agreement.

The papers were in order, Merrow knew that. Yet he was

*WHEN YOUNG Doctor Hal Merrow came to live in Five Forks,*

*he soon found out that sixgun and scalpel went hand in hand*

*The Winchester was held slantwise in front of them*

stalling for time before signing them, trying to assess the slow ferment that was building up in him, the shadowy distrust that had claimed his thinking almost upon his arrival in Five Forks on this morning's stage from Powder River and Cheyenne.

The whole deal is too good to be true, he thought. That was the crux of it. If there was one nugget of wisdom Merrow had gleaned from twenty-seven years of Western living, it was that bargains always carried a penalty, hidden or obvious.

Merrow was lately from Kansas and he wanted to settle in this town. He got a spiritual lift from the far vista of foothills black with lodgepole pine, leading the eye to the snowy-thimbled Bighorn peaks. Five Forks itself was flourishing, prosperous. He would not be gambling his future by choosing this cattle shipping town as the place in which to set up his first medical practice. Or would he?

Something was not as it should be about Fowler, or Hal's instincts were faulty. Fowler was offering him an established clientele, in a field where there was no prospect of competition, a practice complete even to this well-equipped office with comfortable living quarters in the rear, for a paltry thousand dollars. Such an opportunity was fantastic for a young physician whose name had so recently been inked on a university diploma.

Yet he found himself hesitating, hunting for a joker in the deck. A man had to be cautious on a decision this big.

Six weeks ago he had come across Frank Fowler's tantalizing advertisement in a medical journal:

> Opportunity for general practitioner to obtain exclusive territory in thriving cowtown. Any reasonable offer takes established practice, office bldg., stable, horse. Five Forks, Wyo. Terr.

It sounded like an elderly man getting ready to retire after decades of service to his community. But, upon arriving here less than six hours ago, Merrow had found Doc Fowler to be a rugged man of fifty. Doctors didn't retire that early in life, even if they made money by the hatful. And doctors didn't get rich, out here in a raw and lusty Western cattleland.

Now Hal Merrow turned from his reading of the document, his customary bubbling good nature submerged by the gravity of his thoughts. He wanted to ask the older man across the room what ulterior pressure had prompted him to give away a practice he had spent fifteen years to build up. An innate tact forbade that.

What if a competitor had moved into Five Forks, drawing all the medical business away? But that wasn't the case; Merrow had learned that for himself within the hour of his arrival here.

"You must think me wishy-washy," Merrow said, "but I—I seem to be having trouble coming to a decision."

Doc Fowler smiled tolerantly. His red-veined eyes and the slight paunch that was beginning to swell against his belt hinted why Fowler might be selling his practice—the early symptoms of a growing taste for whisky. Perhaps that was the answer. Maybe Doc Fowler had a malpractice charge on his record, some drunken error which had cost him his professional standing.

"Young man," Fowler said gently, "I am not putting pressure on you to buy me out. You came all the way from Abilene on the strength of my ad. You have checked my local references, my title to this property, my books. You offered me a thousand dollars and I accepted. What more can I do?"

HAL MERROW stared down at the paper in his hands without seeing it. The thousand dollars Fowler mentioned was in the moneybelt under his shirt. It represented all that was left of his mother's legacy, after the cost of his medical education. He could comb the world over without finding another bargain like this.

"As I told you in our original correspondence," Fowler went on, "I wish to leave Wyoming to escape the severe winters. A cowtown doctor's life is not an easy one, as you surely realize. I have saved enough to retire. That's all."

Hal Merrow flushed guiltily. He had already found out, from the hostlers at the Wells Fargo station where his stage had

pulled in this morning, that Fowler's reputation was unimpeachable here in Five Forks, that he enjoyed a monopoly of the sawbones trade, as the stocktender had phrased it.

"And with this range war brewing between Bruce Bule's Circle B and them High Basin sodbusters, you'd ought to rake in quite a passel of gunshot-wound business, stranger."

No visible emotion crossed Fowler's ruddy face as he watched this tall man from Kansas scribble his signature on the two copies of their agreement, then unbutton the fustian Prince Albert which was the badge of their calling and dig under his flannel shirt to get at his moneybelt.

The die was cast. Whatever vicissitudes of fortune the future might bring, Harold Merrow, M.D., was now the only medical practitioner in an area as large as some states back East.

There was a stage pulling out for Salt Lake shortly, and Fowler, with his ties cut, would be on it. They were shaking hands and wishing each other luck when Merrow put the question that had been needling him all day. "What's this range war I've been hearing about, Doctor?"

Fowler's color darkened and he avoided Merrow's gaze.

"A community of sodbusters have taken over High Basin on the other side of the first range there," Fowler said. "Cowmen hereabouts are banded together in a combine headed by a rancher named Bruce Bule. It won't come to a range war."

"Meaning that the cattlemen are going to make room for the farmers?"

"Just the opposite, son. Bule's faction is making it too tough for the rangers to stick it out. But that does not concern a doctor, Merrow. We are neutral by tradition and by duty. If this thing comes to a head—outright war—keep out of it. And remember, Five Forks is a cattle town, and always will be . . . ."

Fowler was gone, and Merrow's sense of unease remained. Yet he had not gone into this thing with his eyes closed. He had checked Fowler's references this morning at the Stockman's Bank, at the Prairie Mercantile, at the office of town marshal Jim Deckert in the jailhouse. Not one word of censure had these solid citizens spoken concerning Fowler. And yet Merrow had the feeling that he was saddled with another man's troubles.

He unbuckled the straps of his camelbag trunk and began the business of establishing the marks of his own tenure around the office. A faded rectangle on the oatmeal wallpaper above Fowler's desk exactly matched his own framed diploma, hard-won after the grueling years at Johns Hopkins.

He unlocked the gleaming plate-glass door of a sterilizer and laid out his own hemostats and forceps, cuture needles and probes, retractors and trepanning saw.

From the depths of the trunk he took out the signboard, ornate gold letters on black which read:

HAROLD MERROW, M.D., GENERAL PRACTICE

He rummaged around in a kitchen cabinet to find screwdriver and hammer, and thus emerged from the little frame cottage to give Five Forks a first view of their new madico.

BORN IN Montana, raised in a Kansas trail town, Merrow fitted into this frontier scene readily enough. His heavy shoulders filled out his coat and tapered to a lean, rock-hard middle; his legs, encased in corduroy trousers tucked into flat-heeled boots, showed the telltale curvature of a man more at home in a saddle than in a swivel chair.

The years of internship in Baltimore had dimmed the oiled bronze tone of his flesh, but a few weeks of Wyoming's sun and wind and rain would restore the weathered look. Under the flat-crowned Kansas style stetson, Merrow's raven black hair grew thick and curling. Under thick brows his eyes held the blue-black sheen of gunmetal.

He took down Fowler's shingle and replaced it on the rusty iron bracket with his own.

This was a highly sentimental moment for Merrow, for he had been a kid in his late teens when his mother had presented him with the M.D.'s sign, knowing where

his ambitions lay. Molly Merrow had not lived to see her son get his degree. But it had been her meager legacy which had enabled him to enroll in a Baltimore medical school, finest in the nation.

A thud of hoofs on the hard-packed gumbo of the street fronting the office came to a stop as Merrow turned away from his job. He looked over to see a pair of oddly-contrasted riders reined up alongside the plank walk, studying his shingle.

One was a white-haired, white-goateed man of sixty-odd, whose expensive boots and black coat and trousers, whose aristocratic bearing in the saddle branded him as a power in this community. His blue roan stallion bore a Circle B brand on its glossy rump. His saddle was embellished with bright silverwork.

His companion was younger, thirty-odd, heavy muscles swelling his Rob Roy plaid shirt. A pair of bead-bright eyes nested in greasy hammocks of flesh peered out from the brim of a sweat-stained stetson. A pair of rubber-stocked Colt sixguns were slung for crossdraw at his belly. His horse, a sorrel gelding, was likewise branded Circle B.. Master and slave, these two.

The older man cuffed back his hundred-dollar cleft-crown stetson and observed with a certain cultured air, "You are young to be stepping into Doctor Fowler's boots. Let us hope you are endowed with the same good sense of the man you are replacing, Dr. Merrow. The right man can prosper here."

Merrow grinned to hide the fact that he had not missed the overtones of challenge.

"You have the advantage on me, I am afraid. I am at your service, in spite of my tender years."

The white-haired man spoke to his companion without taking his ice-gray eyes off Merrow. "Rolf, this is the Forks' new doctor. Merrow, my name is Bruce Bule, boss of the Circle B outfit north of town. This is my ramrod, Rolf Hadaway."

MERROW acknowledged the introduction with a nod, wondering if the situation called for him to invite them to light. On the surface, they appeared to be two riders passing by and noticing his new shingle. He could hardly credit this as an official welcome to Five Forks, for their manner was patently arrogant.

He recalled what the Wells Fargo hostler had predicted about a future spate of gunshot-wound cases: *A range war brewing between Bruce Bule's Circle B and them High Basin sodbusters. . . .*

The deferential way in which the hostler had mentioned Bule's name told Merrow that he was now meeting the reigning rancher of this predominately cattle land. Hadaway, judging from his shifty eye and the heavy sixguns, more than likely served Circle B as a gunslinger as well as foreman.

"It is best that you get off on the right foot here in Five Forks," Bule went on, removing a cigar from a vest pocket and firing it up. "As Fowler may have told you, he was a thorn in my side. He no doubt warned you not to make the mistakes he did."

Merrow felt the color lifting in his cheeks. This was what he'd been wondering about. Fowler was a man afraid of something. He was afraid of Bruce Bule's authority on this range.

"Fowler gave me no warnings," he said carefully. "I have come here purely as a doctor, to do a doctor's work. To minister to the sick, to heal the injured—whoever they may be."

Blue smoke purled from Bruce Bule's aristocratic nostrils.

"A pretty speech. Worthy of any slick-ear disciple of Hippocrates. But get this straight and never forget it, Doc. There are limits to where you can practice in this district. There are certain areas where you are—to put it bluntly—barred from entry."

Merrow felt the slow white heat of anger rising in him.

"By whose authority, Bule?"

The cowman hipped around in saddle to slap a gauntleted palm on the Circle B brand on his blue roan's sleek hide.

"Circle B is the authority in this corner of Wyoming, Doctor. It is a syndicate of cattle outfits which I have the honor to head. This town is part of it. The bank,

the retail merchants, the courthouse—all move inside the orbit of my Circle B combine."

Merrow's smile did not reach his eyes.

"I'm afraid," he said, "doctors will have to be exempt from your feudal regime, Bule. Or at least, I will be."

Bule's eyes held a subtle admiration for Merrow's attitude.

"I take it," the rancher said, "Doc Fowler did not think to tell you about Circle B's canyon blockade."

Merrow shook his head. "He did not. Blockade, Mr. Bule, is a dictatorial word. If a blockade keeps a doctor and a patient apart, it is something I would not tolerate."

Bruce Bule gestured up the street to where a wagon road looped off and away into the shadow-clotted notch of a vast canyon.

Ignoring Merrow's declaration of defiance, the Circle B boss said, "Yonder is Medicine Bow Canyon. At its far end is a bench country we call High Basin. The Utes once hunted elk there. Since the white man came it has been cattle graze. Recently it has been taken over by sodbusters. It is they who are affected by my blockade."

Merrow recognized the old, old pattern of this situation. He had run across it before, in Montana, in the Nations, in Kansas; the gradual encroachment of plowshares and barbwire on land considered by stockmen to be their inalienable domain.

"Are you trying to tell me," Merrow said coldly, "that you would bar me from making a professional call on a High Basin nester?"

THE CATTLEMAN took the cigar from his teeth and sent a long streamer of smoke from his lips as he returned Merrow's stare, seeming to use that interval to size up this newcomer with a new and keener interest.

"You do not strike me as a man who could be intimidated," Bule observed. "I somehow have the impression you were a rider before you took up medicine?"

"I'm not a stranger to a rope or a branding iron."

Merrow saw Bule's eyes thaw slightly. "Then you will understand why cattlemen, to survive, must keep sodbusters from overflowing this country and ruining the grass with their plows."

Merrow said doggedly, "You haven't answered my question. Are you denying these High Basin people access to medical attention?"

Bruce Bule appeared to choose his next words carefully.

"I am in the process of strangling out every nester in High Basin. Those homesteads cannot be reached by any existing road other than the one through Medicine Bow Canyon. That canyon happens to be a part of Circle B. I am quite within my rights to blockade that road to granger traffic, incoming or outgoing."

Bule spoke with the smooth confidence of a man who believed himself to be utterly in the right.

When Merrow did not comment, he went on quietly, "My blockade will bear fruit. Not one nester wagon has traveled to or from the Basin this spring. Without supplies, food, equipment, they cannot survive.

"A generation ago, cattlemen would have invaded High Basin and burned those squatters out. Driven off their stock. Maybe shot a hard-head or two. But that is not necessary. I am achieving the same result by denying High Basin access to food and supplies. Those homesteads are withering on the vine. Next winter will see them long gone, and this country safe for cows and cowmen."

Bule picked up his silver-spangled reins and curvetted his big roan back against Hadaway's stirrup. Throughout this scene the gun-hung foreman had not uttered a word, his swart face regarding Merrow with a cold and sullen amusement.

"Fowler," the cattle king said, "could not practice here and justify the dictates of his conscience. He was what you might call an honorable man, but an unrealistic fool. Do you have any comment to make on your own stand?"

Hal Merrow sucked in a deep breath. Bule had flung his challenge. Merrow's entire future hinged on his reaction now. A less courageous man would avoid the issue,

*Merrow knew that Bule had been the target of that shot from ambush*

pretend a submission he might not feel. But evasion was alien to Merrow's make-up.

"Why, Bule," the young Kansan said slowly, "my stand is a simple one. I will serve wherever I am needed and recognize no boundary you may have set up. You can go to hell."

Bule shrugged. A moment later he and Hadaway were galloping off, the dust of their passage swirling over the street.

A roughly-dressed crowd of Five Forks residents had gathered on the porch of a deadfall across the street. They had heard Bule's ultimatum and Merrow's defiance. .

They held an uneasy silence as Hal Merrow stalked across the street, his eyes picking out the one spectator he knew—Jim Deckert, the marshal he had met this morning.

"I suppose," he said dryly, "I made a mistake, Marshal."

Deckert flushed, running fingers through his silver hair. His eyes avoided Merrow's as he said defensively, "Reckon you did. Bule calls the dances hereabouts, Doc. You can't buck him."

"Bule owns that star you wear, does he, Marshal?"

Deckert flushed. "Lay off, Doc. You're new here, so don't back into the wrong stall. You'll have all the business you can handle without depending on the granger trade up in the Basin."

Merrow said, "I didn't come here to get rich."

Deckert went on, "You heard what Bule said. This is cow country. Grangers take over High Basin, first thing you know they'll be filing claims on government leases outside. Where Bule made his mistake was not clamping down four year ago when Ted McCoy and his string of wagons rolled up to the Basin. Bule thought a hard winter would frighten them nesters out. He was wrong. He's got to buck fifty-odd families up there now."

Merrow's raking glance laid its scorn on the phalanx of men whose spokesman Deckert was.

He said acidly, "In order to live in Five Forks, then, a man has got to be gutless. Hop whenever Bule hollers. Well, to hell with Bruce Bule."

IN A COLD fury, Merrow stalked back to the privacy of his office. The picture was clear now. Fowler had sold out for a pittance because his professional ethics could not survive under a cattle king's domination. Up in High Basin, women would get pregnant, children would break bones, accident and epidemic would strike as they struck any segment of humanity anywhere. Yet Bruce Bule had denied medical care for fifty or more families.

"It looks," Merrow observed, "like I bought into big trouble."

From his camelback trunk he drew out a coiled cartridge belt, the oiled holster carrying a heavy Frontier model six-shooter, a weapon he had brought to Wyoming out of pure sentiment rather than any notion that

he would ever belt that .45 at his flank.

His hand coiled about the solid bone stock of the Colt, a thumb twirling the heavy cylinder as he hefted the weapon. This sixgun had been his father's a generation ago, when Buck Merrow had walked the streets of Abilene with a silver star on his vest.

This gun had been in Buck Merrow's fist that bleak night seventeen years ago when a drunken cowpuncher up the trail from Texas with a longhorn herd had opened fire on Abilene's marshal from an alley's mouth.

Hal Merrow, then a kid of nine, had seen his father bleed out his life over a period of weeks because Abilene had not been able to provide a licensed surgeon's care. Out of that experience had come Hal's unflagging zeal to practice medicine.

The Colt .45 had been his father's only legacy to his son. The weapon did not represent a violent way of life. To Hal, the sixgun was an instrument of justice, just as a surgeon's scalpel was an instrument of mercy.

Now, the .45 became a symbol in Hal Merrow's mind, as much a symbol of his new life here in Wyoming as the glittering silver instruments in his kitbag. Scalpel and sixgun might go hand and hand here in the looming shadow of the Bighorn range, one essential to the other.

He spread his blankets on Fowler's bunk in the rear room and cooked a frugal meal from supplies found in the kitchen cupboard.

As the afternoon ran its course with no visitors at his door, Merrow reflected bitterly that this was no indication that Five Forks was an inhospitable town. In due time the housewives would drop around with their pies and cakes and well-wishes.

Tomorrow, when the news got around that Five Forks had a new medico, he would find patients coming to him with boils to lance, colicky babies to physic, pills to prescribe. Or would Bule's disfavor cause this town to boycott his service? That could well happen.

When night came Hal Merrow turned in early, not until now aware of the bone-weariness which the long journey from Kansas by train and stagecoach had put in him.

DAWN'S first pink promise was staining the window of his bedroom lean-to when Merrow was roused by a tapping of a stone on the glass pane. A girl's voice reached his ears, taut with fatigue or terror, he didn't know which.

"Doctor Fowler—wake up! I've got to see you. It's Dad!"

Merrow swung out from under his blankets and reached for his pants and shirt. He called out, "The door is unlocked. Come in."

He saw his visitor's shadow cross the window and he wondered why she had not knocked at his door. There was something almost surreptitious about her gentle tapping on the glass.

Merrow was hauling on his boots when the door opened. It was dark, too dark for him to see the young woman who closed the door instantly and stood with her back to it.

"Just a minute. I'll get a lamp lighted," he said.

He heard a break in his visitor's strained breathing and her whisper checked him in the act of scratching a match.

"No, I mustn't be seen here, you know that. Doctor, Dad's leg is worse. He thinks it's gangrene. He'll lose his leg or maybe his life if you refuse to come this time. You must—you must."

Merrow stepped over to the window and pulled down a green shade. Then he wiped a match alight on his pant-leg.

Man and girl regarded each other in the sudden light.

Merrow's visitor was a slim woman around twenty, wearing waist overalls and checkered gingham shirt. A quirt was looped around one wrist and he noticed a Bisley .38 protruding from the waistband of her levis. Under a flat-crowned hat, wheat-blond hair tumbled shoulder long.

As the match died in his fingers, Merrow saw dismay come into the girl's eyes as she realized he was not Frank Fowler.

He said quickly to allay her alarm, "I am Doctor Merrow. I bought out Fowler's practice yesterday. Now about your father—"

He heard the girl's gusty exhalation, a pent-up sigh of despair.

"It's no use. You see, I'm Peggy McCoy. My Dad lives in High Basin. Doc Fowler has undoubtedly told you not to accept any clients among us homesteaders."

Hal Merrow said gently, "I have heard all about the canyon blockade, from Bruce Bule himself. How did you get here? Isn't the canyon guarded at night?"

"I came over the Hump, through the timber. Would you—let me lead you back to the Basin if I promise you we could make it without Bule's guards spotting us?"

Merrow was heading for his office in the front of the building. From the darkness, Peggy McCoy heard his calm answer.

"Of course I'll come with you. Soon as I get my kit and saddle up. You can tell me about your father's condition on the ride over to the Basin."

Fowler's setup included a small sheet-iron stable in the rear of the lot, which afforded shelter for a buckskin saddle horse. Working in the first gray daylight, Merrow threw a stock saddle on the buckskin, tightened the cinch with an expert hand, and stowed his doctor's satchel in one of the outsized cantlebags which went with the gear.

PEGGY McCOY was waiting in the rear of the stable astride a lather-flecked pinto when Hal led Fowler's saddler out and stepped into stirrups.

The girl swung her horse around at right angles to the Medicine Bow Canyon road which Merrow knew to be the most direct route to the High Basin homesteads, and Merrow had to spur into a quick gallop to overtake her. She was leaving Five Forks by an obscure back street, apparently heading for the pine forest which clothed the foothill spurs south of the cowtown.

"Dad's horse fell with him during a blizzard six weeks ago, the last storm of the season," Peggy McCoy was saying above the steady drumroll of their horses' hoofs. "It was a bad break, the jagged end of the bone coming out of the flesh just below his right knee."

Merrow said, "Doc Fowler set it okay?"

He saw the girl's wind-flushed face stiffen.

"He tried to reach us. Bule's gunmen turned him back at the canyon road block. We called in neighbors to set the leg as best we could. It was two weeks before Doc Fowler finally made it over the hump. By that time it was too late. The bones were knitting crookedly."

"And then infection set in?"

"Yes, his leg is terribly swollen. He was delirious all day yesterday. We—we didn't blame Doc too much. It was worth his life to visit High Basin."

That must have been about the time Fowler put his advertisement in the medical paper, then, Merrow thought.

At the edge of the timber, where lodgepole pines grew thick as broom bristles, the girl headed her horse through a thicket of underbrush where patches of snow still lay unmelted. There was visible trail. The going would be appallingly difficult.

Reaching the girl, Merrow leaned from stirrup to seize her bridle ring. She was staring at him in mute terror as he crowded his buckskin against her stirrup.

"Now listen, Peggy. I'm new here. How far is it to High Basin, the way you're taking me?"

"Over the Hump? It's twenty miles as the crow flies. If my pony holds out we can make it to the homestead by noon."

Merrow shook his head. "If your father is in such bad shape that he's delirious, we can't spend seven hours reaching his bedside. How far is it by way of Medicine Bow Canyon?"

The girl dragged a shivering hand across her eyes. He could tell that she had spent the night in saddle, bucking her way through the mountainside brush to reach Five Forks. She was dead for sleep.

"It's only ten miles by the road. But the Circle B blockade—"

"Where is this road block?"

She made a weary gesture. "Two miles outside of town." Her eyes met his and the glazed look their depths held reminded him of a trapped animal pleading for its life. "We can't go that way, Doctor."

Merrow's hand dropped to the bulge his six-shooter made under his black coat-tail.

"How many guards? What does the road block consist of?"

Peggy McCoy said desperately, "You can't even think about it, Doctor. Travel into the basin is impossible by the canyon."

"Answer my question. I want to know what I'm up against."

The girl's shoulders lifted and fell. "The road block is a log gate, chained and padlocked, where the bridge crosses the Whetstone. This time of day there would be two guards on duty. They have a little shack up the north wall of the canyon overlooking the gate."

Merrow gathered up his reins.

"You head on over the Hump," he said. "I hope when you reach home I may have some good news for you."

He saw that the girl was on the verge of hysterical tears but, game in the face of what must have been a hopeless panic at his decision, she forced herself back under control.

"If you get to the Basin—"

"I'll get there."

"The road forks at the summit, at the mouth of the Basin. Take the right-hand fork. You'll see our cabin at the edge of the timber. A cabin with a red lava-rock chimney. We were the first settlers to build up there—"

Merrow lifted his hand in a farewell salute and swung his buckskin around, crashing his way back down the slope to emerge from the timber.

SWINGING north, he skirted the pine growth along a slope overlooking Five Forks, and hit the Medicine Bow road a half-mile outside the cowtown limits.

At this early hour he doubted if anyone had seen him leave Five Forks in Peggy McCoy's company.

A blood-red sun was poised over the granite teeth of the Bighorn divide as he put the buckskin into a lope, following the wagon road between the looming shoulders of the gorge. There had been considerable traffic here since the spring thaws, as testified by the fresh ruts in the gumbo mud; but none of those wheels had been High Basin bound, he knew.

Off to his right, Whetstone River boiled noisily over its rapids. According to the girl, Bruce Bule had established his freeze-out gate where this road crossed the river.

The canyon walls were lifting steadily, narrowing the road into a ledge between cliff and river. He rounded an elbow of the gorge where the sunlight did not penetrate and got his first glimpse of Bule's road block, half a mile ahead. A massive, pine-log gate formed a barrier midway across a puncheon bridge fifty feet over the river.

Merrow lifted his Colt from leather, checked the loads, and thrust the gun into a voluminous pocket of his Prince Albert. His eyes ranged on ahead, seeing the canyon walls flatten out.

As Peggy had warned him, there was a shack perched like a mud-dauber's nest on the steep granite slope north of the canyon bridge. A wisp of smoke curled from a rusty stovepipe jutting from the shack's roof. Bule's guards were probably rustling up breakfast.

He knew he could be seen making this approach to the blockade gate, that he was already within range of a rifle. He pulled his hat brim down to shield his face in case a Circle B road guard had him under a binoculars' inspection.

Yet, actually, any attempt at deception was useless. The horse he was riding would be recognized as Fowler's. His own costume would take him out of the category of a saddle tramp, mistakenly taking this road into the Bighorns.

A clatter of steel-shod hoofs on stone, close by the road to his right, caused Merrow to rein up sharply. His hand was reaching for the pocketed .45 when horse and rider made a bucking, plunging ascent out of the river's gorge, the animal sleekly wet from a recent fording of the Whetstone. It was Peggy McCoy, cutting across the canyon to intercept him short of the bridge.

"No," Merrow said angrily. "If I had wanted you along I would have asked you back in the timber. Turn back."

The girl reined alongside his stirrup, fear and defiance fighting for possession of her.

"Not unless you do, Doctor."

"No. Alone, I can handle this. You'll draw fire quicker than I would. Now get going."

Peggy shook her head. "You are a stranger, risking your hide for the sake of my father. Bule's guards know me. Besides, they wouldn't shoot down a woman."

The gunshot came as if to write a period to her words, a .30-30 slug making its high sharp whistle between them and ricocheting off the rock wall behind. Both horses threw up their heads and snorted.

"A warning shot," Merrow commented, watching a wisp of gunsmoke float through the sunbeams up by the guardhouse shack. Echoes of the Winchester's report clamored and ebbed up the far canyon. "Don't ruin my chances of getting through, Peggy."

THE GIRL was already plunging her horse forward, her jaw set in an adamant jutting which left Merrow with no recourse other than to overtake her and come between the girl and the guard's line of fire.

He sensed the terror this girl was carrying, the unshakable code of loyalty that had impelled her to overtake him, to share whatever hazard this showdown would bring.

The road leveled off as it made its slow angle into the rubble ramp approaching the log span. The rumble of hoofs was obliterated by the steady organ bass of the Whetstone flowing down the gorge fifty feet below the bridge. The water was deep and glass green down there, flecked with foam from rapids above the bridge.

A man carrying a Winchester was scrambling down the north slope from the guard's quarters now. Merrow muttered, "Rolf Hadaway," recognizing Bule's foreman by his plaid shirt and bushy Angora chaps.

"His relief man is covering him from the cabin up there," Peggy McCoy said. "You won't make it, Doctor. If we turned back now there would be no more shooting—"

Merrow saw Hadaway's partner, hunkered down on the ledge of rock in front of the guardhouse, sunlight glinting off the carbine he held, butt grounded. Hadaway was taking it easy down the path to the bridge, watching his footing carefully, letting his partner cover the riders.

Merrow and the girl were putting their mounts out onto the decking of the bridge now. Ahead, midway across the fifty-foot span, was Circle B's road block—a massive gate of lodgepole timbers, ten feet high, closed with a padlocked logging chain.

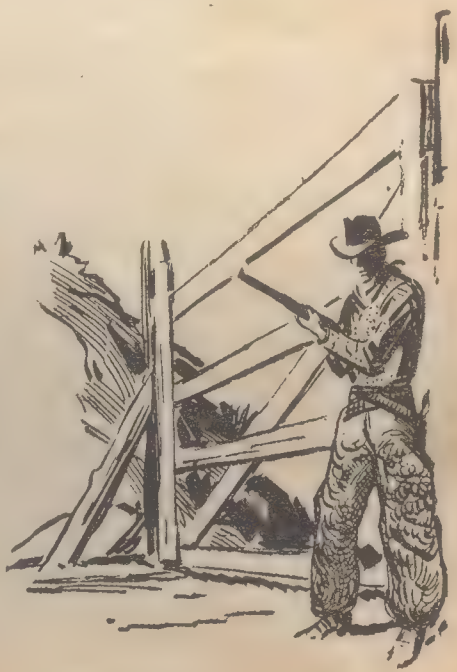
They let their horses muzzle the rustic gate before stopping. Merrow said in a low voice, "Dismount and keep your horse between you and the guard up yonder."

Peggy said in a faint voice, "I have nothing to worry about from Hadaway. He—he wants me to marry him. But he wouldn't hesitate to shoot you if he thought you were armed, Doctor."

Merrow's eyes were on Rolf Hadaway. The big foreman was strolling nonchalantly out on the bridge now, Winchester held slantwise in front of him, a mocking grin on his lips.

Ten feet distant, Hadaway came to a halt and lifted his Winchester, the muzzle covering Merrow at point-blank range.

"Peggy," the Circle B ramrod's faintly amused voice came above the grind of the river below, "you didn't have to sneak over the Hump last night, or however you got to town. I'd open the gate for you, even if I have to go agin Bruce Bule's orders."



***Bruce Bule's road block***

Merrow caught the lustful implication in Hadaway's words to the girl. His every instinct fined down to a tight channel of concentration as he saw Hadaway's attention turn to him.

"Out for a joy ride, Doc?" the gunman asked.

Merrow said after a pause, "I wanted to size up your canyon block. Bule played it cagey, I see. If anyone tried to blow up your gate they'd wreck the bridge and cut themselves off entirely."

Hadaway's eyes narrowed. "You've seen the setup. Now get to hell back to town. The only time this blockade will be lifted is when them sodbusters pull their wagons out of the Basin for keeps. I'll let Peggy through. For you, this is dead end, Doc."

PEGGY McCOY, eying Merrow across her saddle rim, watched for the man's reaction. The young medico was scowling, apparently debating this thing, reading it for the hopeless impasse it was.

"Stay put, Peggy." His low order reached the girl's ears, and then Merrow reached for the reins with his left hand and put one boot to stirrup. "You win, Hadaway," he addressed the guard.

The horse danced away from his weight in a circling movement which momentarily blocked him from Hadaway's line of fire. Hopping around on one leg as he followed the horse's spooky maneuvering, Merrow's right arm lifted the Colt .45 from his coat pocket without Hadaway being able to observe that motion.

Over the saddle, Merrow saw that Hadaway had lowered his rifle and was stepping over to the bridge railing, watching Merrow's attempt to mount. In the next instant the Circle B man saw the Five Forks doctor step back from his horse, his thumb earing the gnarled hammer of a Colt to full cock.

In this instant, the advantage of a gun drop was all Merrow's. Up the north slope of the canyon, Hadaway's partner still squatted in front of the guardhouse, unaware of the sudden reversal of events down on the bridge.

"Walk toward me," Merrow said in a distinct voice which would not carry to the second guard above the river's thunder. "Peggy, swing your horse around and stand beside me, between the horses. We've licked this thing."

Hadaway's stubbled cheeks had paled to the color of banana meat. To lift his rifle for action would be to invite a point-blank slug from Merrow. Knots of muscle chewed at the corners of his jaws as Hadaway, flicking a desperate glance toward his partner up on the canyon wall, walked slowly forward.

"Pitch the carbine into the river, Hadaway. And hope to God your partner up there doesn't start shooting. You wouldn't live to see him drop me."

A groaning sound wailed from the depths of Hadaway's bull throat as, with a jerky motion, he flung the lever-action .73 repeater over the bridge railing.

"Keep your arms up," Merrow ordered, "while Peggy takes care of your side arms. Dump them into the river, Peggy. And keep out of my line of fire."

The nester girl's nerves were in tight control now. Shielded from Hadaway's partner by the intervening bulk of Merrow's horse, she stepped forward to lift Hadaway's cross-draw revolvers from holsters and fling them out into space.

A yell sounded from the guardhouse and Merrow shot a quick glance that way to see that Hadaway's partner had ducked out of sight into the shack, biding his chance to catch a target in the open.

"Unlock the gate," Merrow said, some of the tension leaving him now as the girl backed up to stand at his side.

Hadaway appeared completely at ease now. He said, "I ain't got the keys, Doc. They're up at the shack in Bill Moody's pocket."

Merrow thought that over and decided to take the Circle B boss at his word.

"All right," he said. "Walk along the rail until you come to the gate. I want you close enough to Peggy and I to keep your partner up there from gambling a pot shot."

Hadaway moved along the splintered bridge railing until he stood at arm's length from the bridge. Peggy, realizing what

Merrow planned, led her pinto out of the way and saw Merrow take point-blank aim at the bronze padlock which was looped through the gate's fastening chain.

Merrow squeezed trigger. Hadaway recoiled, wincing as his thick Angora chaps cushioned the sting of flying metal fragments.

WIND WHIPPED the gunsmoke aside. Merrow's slug had sprung the padlock and the chain now swung loose from the log gate. The barrier's own weight was beginning to swing it ponderously open.

Merrow moved in fast, to jam his gun gun muzzle into Hadaway's back. From the guardhouse up the canyon wall came Bill Moody's bellow of alarm. Mists fogging up from the rapids had apparently kept the other guard from seeing his partner disarmed; but the slowly opening gate was sure proof that Hadaway was no longer in control of the situation here on the bridge.

"Moody won't shoot," Merrow heard Rolf Hadaway's resigned voice. "You're holding the aces. What next?"

Merrow passed his free hand expertly over the foreman's shirt, satisfying himself that the man did not carry a hideout gun.

Then he said, "We stick together until we're up the road out of Moody's range. If he starts shooting I pull trigger."

Hadaway, arms elevated, headed out along the bridge, Merrow's gun prodding his spine, Peggy following at their heels between the two saddle horses. A quick glance toward the guardhouse revealed that Bill Moody was keeping inside out of sight, probably to put the glasses on them.

Leaving the bridge, the compact group moved up the road for twenty yards until heavy underbrush and mounds of talus blocked them from Moody's view. Not until then did Merrow release the pressure of his sixgun on the foreman's back.

"Ride on ahead, Peggy," Merrow ordered. "Lead my horse. I'll join you directly."

When the girl had vanished around a bend of the road, Merrow saw by the frozen expression on Hadaway's face that he expected to be shot down in cold blood. Instead, Hal Merrow said quietly, "I want you to carry a message to Bule this morning. Where is Circle B headquarters located from here?"

Relief showed through the moisture covering Hadaway's face. He gestured up the road in the direction Peggy had gone with the horses.

"Mile yonderward, take the bridge back across the Whetstone and Circle B is on the ridge overlooking the flat country."

Merrow said, "In that case, wait a couple of hours before you follow us, otherwise I'll think you're stalking for meat and knock you out of your saddle. I want you to tell Bule that if his blockade isn't removed by sundown tomorrow, I will take steps to remove it if I have to requisition a cavalry detachment from Fort Laramie."

Hadaway grinned and made no answer.

"High Basin," Merrow went on, "is government land. So far Bule has been running a bluff on those nesters, trying to starve them out, and he knows it. Bule isn't so big the federal government can't move into his domain and establish law and order, Hadaway."

Hadaway stood by the roadside brush, thumbs hooked in his shell belts. He saw Merrow holster his gun and turn to head up the road after Peggy.

"You'd ought to of gunned me down while you had the chance, Doc," Hadaway called after the doctor. "Bule won't open this bridge on your bluff. This road is on Circle B land. Not even the Army could force Bule to open it."

Peggy McCoy was waiting in saddle when Merrow came up around the bend of the road and reached for his reins. The tension on her face turned to relief at sight of him.

"I'm sorry it was Hadaway," she said when they were under way again. "He is more animal than human. Hadaway will not rest until he's put a bushwhack bullet in your back, Doctor."

Merrow shrugged, his mind already concerned with how he would find Peggy's father upon their arrival in High Basin an hour from now.

"I never cross bridges," he said, "until I come to 'em, Peggy."

The girl's taut smile transformed her face into one of uncommon beauty. "I notice," she said, "you have a habit of crossing them, too."

LONG FINGERS of purple shadow crawled across the lush farming land of High Basin as the sun westered. In front of Ted McCoy's rock-and-log cabin on the southwest side of the Basin, a majority of the settlers of the isolated mountain pocket were massed under the spreading cottonwood shade trees.

A few of them, McCoy's closer neighbors, had been here by midmorning when Peggy had arrived with the new Five Forks doctor—arrived by way of the Medicine Bow Canyon road, a thing that had not occurred since the spring thaws this year.

Now it was two o'clock, and Hal Merrow had been inside the McCoy cabin for four solid hours with no report forthcoming. The grapevine had carried the news across the broad expanse of the Basin, and the grangers had answered that call, arriving by horseback and afoot, in the wagons that had brought them across the plains from Iowa and Indiana, in buckboards and mule carts.

Women in challis sacques and Mother Hubbard bonnets, children in linsey-woolsey and patched jeans, gaunt-faced sodbusters in their bibbed overalls and frayed straw hats, gathered in groups here and there about the yard, talking in subdued voices, their eyes straying now and again to the oiled-paper window where the patriarch of their granger clan, Ted McCoy, had been bedfast these weary, suspenseful weeks.

"He's daid. Old Ted's daid," commented ninety-year-old Hedwiga Riker, oldest settler in the basin. "We'd of heard him bellering if that doctor feller had operated on that mortified flesh. I tell you, old Ted's daid."

Young Claud Ellister, whose house-raising and community wedding had been the last in High Basin since the cattlemen had sealed off their settlement from the outside world, spoke through the funereal quiet.

"Naw, I smelt chloroform. The doc put him to sleep before he got out his knife."

Big Wahlbord Tummings, a giant Hoosier whose homestead lay across the Whetstone in the north end of the Basin, fingered his shotgun and spoke passionately through the brooding quiet.

"If Ted loses a laig it's the last straw, neighbors. If he dies and leaves Peggy an orphan, you know whose fault it is. Bruce Bule's. I tell you, we got to meet force with force. We got to organize into Vigilantes and throw the fear of the Lord into Circle B, even if we got to string up a few cowmen to do it."

The slab door of the McCoy cabin opened and a deep hush went over the congregated nesters in the front yard as many of them got their first glimpse of this fabulous young doctor from Five Forks, Hal Merrow, who had ridden through Bule's canyon blockade this morning on his errand of mercy.

Merrow was drying his hands on a towel. He had stripped to his shirt sleeves and his face was as gaunt as a skull's. His eyes ranged over the silent crowd of settlers without appearing to see them, eyes that gave them no answer to the question uppermost in their minds.

From over by the well came Hedwiga Riker's senile wail, "He's daid. Ted McCoy's daid."

A RUSTLE of whispered protest went over the group. The sound seemed to snap Hal Merrow back to reality. He draped the towel over his shoulder and, reaching into a hip pocket, drew out a can of tobacco and a briar pipe.

When he spoke his voice was freighted with a weariness almost beyond his power to endure, indicative of the strain of these past four hours.

"McCoy will pull through," he spoke quietly. "He has come out of the anesthetic and is sleeping. I suggest you all return to your homes. You cannot be of any assistance here. Mrs. Girvan and Mrs. Duerr are going to spend the night here, helping Peggy."

Wahlbord Tummings and Claud Ellister

stalked their way across the yard to halt in front of Merrow.

"Did Ted—lose his laig, Doc?" Ellister asked hoarsely.

Merrow stared down at his hands, the long, sensitive hands that had held a man's destiny this morning.

"I amputated," he said, "below the knee. The gangrene had not entered the joint. Ted McCoy will be able to walk behind a plow again, ride a horse, build fence, plant crops. He is not to be pitied too much, my friends. He is lucky to be alive."

Merrow saw the cold fury enter the eyes of these grangers as they let the grim news filter into their heads. He knew what they were thinking. If Frank Fowler could have visited the patient immediately following his accident, the leg could have been saved. The blame was Bruce Bule's and the cattlemen's combine he represented.

"It will be an eye for an eye, a leg for a leg," Wahlbord Tummings said in a hate-charged voice. "Men, we're organizing a vengeance posse this very day and making our raid on Circle B. Bule will pay for this."

Merrow pushed his way past Tummings and young Ellister, walking down until he stood in the center of the arena of gaunt-faced men and women and their families.

He could read the marks of suffering on these faces, knew that their situation had reached the critical stage, that Bule's blockade of the only outgoing road threatened these humble people with actual starvation before another crop could be harvested in High Basin.

"Force is not the answer," Merrow said quietly, his voice carrying a heavy overtone of authority. "The ranchers think they are fighting for their own survival. It is my opinion that there is room enough in Wyoming for farmers as well as ranchmen. But any violence coming from High Basin will mean your ruin. Up to now, Bruce Bule has harmed none of you directly."

An uneasy silence followed the young doctor's pronouncement. Older and wiser

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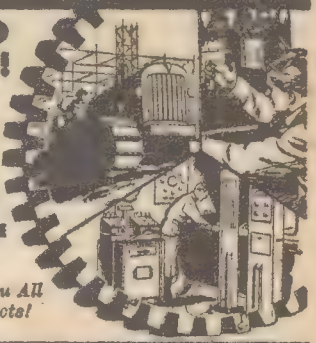

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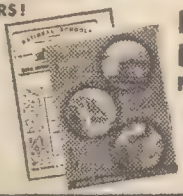

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heads in the group nodded approval of his sound judgment. The younger element, Merrow saw, were behind Tummings and his campaign of night-riding vengeance.

"I am riding back to town now," Hal Merrow went on tiredly. "By way of the canyon. And by way of Bruce Bule's ranch. I want your pledged word that there will be no riding by night, no lynching parties, until I have had a chance to deliver my own ultimatum to Bule to reopen the Basin."

A woman's soft voice came from behind Merrow and he turned to see Peggy McCoy standing there.

"My neighbors will not force this issue, Hal," the girl said quietly. "All we have needed has been a leader and we have found our leader in you."

Hal Merrow's taut face relaxed. A moment before he had faced down a mounting mob spirit here. Now he knew that Peggy McCoy's words had swung this crowd away from violence.

He walked back toward the cabin, a tall and infinitely weary figure, a giant among men who by his very self-assurance commanded their confidence.

INSIDE the McCoy cabin, Merrow stepped into the room where Ted McCoy lay asleep. The chloroform and other medicinal odors were leaving this room where it had been touch-and-go with death for quite a run of time today.

McCoy, pioneer settler of this Basin country, was sleeping peacefully, his crisis past.

Merrow snapped his medical satchel shut, donned his black coat and hat, and made his way out the back door to find Peggy saddling his buckskin.

"If you find the bridge gate closed, come back here for the night and go out over the Hump in the morning, Hal," the girl said anxiously as he accepted the reins. "Don't give Rolf Hadaway a chance to gun you down. He's a killer at heart. Not even Bule's orders would count with Hadaway if he's made up his mind to get you."

Merrow stood there smiling down at her. She had undergone an ordeal second only to her father's, assisting him in the grisly removal of McCoy's leg. Through it all she had borne up with a quiet and steadfast courage which had touched Merrow to the core.

"I imagine," he said, "that Bruce Bule will be riding with me when we reach the blockade at the bridge. I doubt if Bule knows the full extent of the suffering he has caused your neighbors up here. I think he will listen to reason."

Merrow stepped into saddle and rode away, the girl staring after him with a deep panic in her soul, knowing his return from the Basin could be even more hazardous than his coming here today. And yet she knew that regardless of the outcome of his visit with the Circle B boss this evening, Merrow would never lower himself to sneaking out of the Basin by way of the Hump.

McCoy's farmer neighbors were hitching up their wagons and starting a general exodus back to their homes as Merrow put his horse into a gallop, following the Five Forks wagon road toward the entrance of Medicine Bow Canyon.

The sun was touching the pine-furred summit of the Hump now, but there would be several hours of daylight left, plenty of time for a side trek to Circle B on his way back to town.

Reaching the entrance to the canyon, where the road followed a narrow ledge above the brawling rapids of the Whetstone, Merrow had the full strike of the lowering sun in his eyes. He thought of Rolf Hadaway, perhaps waiting somewhere down this canyon, biding his time against Merrow's return. That was a risk that could not be avoided.

Three miles from the Basin's gateway, Merrow saw the side road leading to a heavy-timbered bridge across the river. Peggy had said that Bruce Bule's home ranch lay only three miles beyond that bridge.

REACHING the fork, Merrow reined off toward the Circle B bridge, slowing the buckskin to a walk. He was nearing the wooden ramp at the near end of Bule's span when a rider spurred abrupt-

ly out of an aspen thicket alongside the Circle B road and Merrow saw Bruce Bule sitting his saddle there, a Winchester balanced across the swellfork pommel, aimed steadily at Hal's chest.

"Get your arms up, Merrow!" the Circle B boss called out thickly. "I know you're toting a gun."

Merrow pulled in the buckskin and lifted his arms, reading the cold fury in Bule's narrowed eyes. The news of Hadaway's humiliation had reached the Circle B boss, then.

"Pull that trigger, Bule, and these High Basin people will have a rope around your neck before you can do anything about it."

Bule spurred forward until he was close enough to Merrow to reach out and unhook the doctor's medical satchel from the saddle horn.

With a choked oath, Bule hurled the black kitbag with all his strength. It struck the bridge railing and bounced off into empty space, striking the sun-gilded surface of the Whetstone with a geysering splash.

Merrow's cheeks went bone-white as he saw his precious bag of instruments ride the millrace briefly, then vanish in the spume of a foaming cataract below the bridge. In one savage thrust of his arm, Bule had nullified Merrow's usefulness as a surgeon until those instruments could be replaced.

"That is my answer to you, Doctor," Bule ground out. "You have treated your last case in these parts. Whether you leave this country alive depends on my whim alone."

Merrow lowered his hands to the saddle horn, curbing an impulse to lunge for the rifle in Bule's grasp.

"I was riding out to Circle B," he said, "to try and talk some sense into your head, Bule. I see I misjudged you. You are an outlaw, a renegade, a man drunk with power, a man too small in stature to handle power. You think by tossing my tools into a river you can break my opposition to you. That is the worst mistake you could possibly have made."

Bule's mouth worked under his scimitar of mustache. Some of the fury had died in the man now and something akin to guilt put a high stain on his weathered cheeks.

"You think you are helping those sodbusters, Doctor," Bule panted hoarsely. "You have appointed yourself their Messiah, their deliverer. That is your mistake. If it comes to a range war, those hoe men can't win it."

Merrow shook his head slowly. "I told Hadaway that your canyon blockade would be broken even if it meant bringing the Army in here, Bule. There is no need for a range war, but if one breaks, it is the cattle faction that will lose it, not the farmers. They have the right on their side."

Bule reined his horse back across the road. He made a gesture with his Winchester barrel.

"I have left orders," he said, "for you to be allowed safe passage back to Five Forks. I will be riding down to Five Forks tomorrow. When I get there I expect you to be gone."

Merrow was picking up his reins when the gunshot from somewhere on the Circle B side of the bridge, broke the canyon's muffled river sounds.

Instinct sent Merrow diving from saddle, scrambling to the shelter of a roadside boulder nest.

His Colt was in his fist when he turned to Bule, expecting to face the rancher's blazing .30-30. He was not prepared for what he saw.

Bule's Winchester slipped from his hands to clatter on the road's hardpacked surface. The rancher's big stallion, reacting to the deafening blast of gunfire, reared violently and hurled its rider to the ground, then stampeded off a few yards before becoming entangled in its own reins.

MERROW'S eyes were on Bruce Bule. He saw the bright crimson stains spreading on the rancher's shirt, and knew then that Bule had been the target of that ambush shot. And he believed Hadaway had shot his boss intentionally.

Bule was crawling through the dirt now, struggling to reach his fallen rifle. And then Merrow's ears picked up a drumming of hoofs across the river, and he caught the briefest glimpse of Rolf Hadaway's plaid-

shirted figure as the Circle B ramrod plunged his horse behind a screen of aspens.

Merrow came out of the boulders at a crouch, moving toward the fallen Bule. The range was too far for his Colt, but if he could get his hands on Bule's .30-30—

Hadaway's carbine began beating up echoes across the river. Merrow heard the whining passage of steel-jacketed slugs bracketing him as he flung himself belly-down on the road, scrambling on all fours toward Bule's rifle.

Bule's bloodstained hands were clutching for the Winchester when Merrow reached it. The doctor levered a cartridge into the breech and drove a bullet past the bridge into the aspen jungle where Hadaway had taken concealment.

Before he could fire again, Merrow saw the blurred shape of horse and rider pounding up the scantily-timbered rise to vanish beyond it. Hadaway, failing in his initial attempt at double murder, had chosen flight instead. Merrow could not account for that until he realized that the sun was in Hadaway's eyes, putting him at a hopeless disadvantage in a shooting duel.

Merrow laid the smoking rifle down and turned to where Bruce Bule lay writhing in the road's dust. He ripped open the rancher's shirt and had his look at the bubbling bullet puncture in the oldster's chest, high up on the left side, but a bad one. The bullet had not gone on through. It was probably lodged in Bule's lung.

Bule's eyes were fixed on Merrow. He uttered no sound while Merrow went over to his horse and took a sterile package of gauze bandage from one of the cantlebags. With cool detachment, Merrow staunched the flow of foamy blood, indicative of a pulmonary hemorrhage, and taped the compress in place.

Then Bule spoke, feebly but with complete clarity.

"I'm going to sack my saddle, Doc? Would I have had a chance—if your tools weren't at the bottom of the river?"

Merrow said, "I'll have to make do with whatever I can rustle up at McCoy's. That's the closest house. That slug's got to come out."

"McCoy's? He would never let me under his roof."

Merrow stooped to hoist Bule's inert weight in his arms. Under different circumstances—without Hadaway prowling this canyon—he would have cut a pair of saplings and made a crude travois for transporting his patient back into the Basin.

As it was, Bule would have to be moved by horseback. Whether he would survive the journey back to McCoy's was doubtful.

Merrow was lashing Bule's wrists to the horn with strips of roller bandage when the wounded man rallied out of a faint.

"One thing—want you to know before I cash out, Doctor. I was shot—by my own ramrod. Hadaway. And on—purpose."

Merrow nodded. "I know that. He was after us both."

"Yes. Hadaway—ambitious to take over Circle B. Wanted me out of the way. I've—known that. He wanted to make it appear—you and me met at the bridge and shot it out. I'll try—when we get to McCoy's—to put that down in writing."

PEGGY McCOY left the house carrying a bucket and a teakettle, heading for the well. There was no moon tonight, but the blaze of Wyoming stars made a lantern unnecessary. Dawn was not far off. It had been nearly ten hours since Hal Merrow had arrived here with Bruce Bule.

For Peggy, this was her first breath of fresh air since they had stretched the Circle B cattle king out on the kitchen table to begin a grim battle for the man's life.

The ordeal was behind them now. The scene Peggy had just left was one which would never leave her.

Her father, sleeping peacefully now after his own ordeal, lay side by side in the rustic bed with the man who had been the author of all their past hardships, the cattleman who had sworn to drive McCoy and all his neighbors out of High Basin.

Now the two arch enemies lay with heads nested on adjoining pillows, their lives depending upon the dedicated skill of a man neither had known existed, a few short hours ago.

If the resection of her father's gangrenous

tissue had not been a surgical miracle, there was no use for Merrow to deny that he had accomplished a sensational achievement in Bule's case.

To her dying day, Peggy McCoy would never cease to marvel at the ingenuity the young stranger from Kansas had exhibited in the removal of a .30-30 bullet from the cattle king's chest.

Using a wisp of bailing wire in lieu of a probe, her father's razor as a scalpel, two bent spoon handles for retractors—with such primitive tools, boiled antiseptically clean in a pie tin on the kitchen stove and handled with a crude pair of pliers instead of surgical forceps—Hal Merrow had given his avowed enemy a better than even chance for survival.

Peggy's heart had felt a bursting pride, a deep thankfulness that destiny had cast her as Merrow's assistant in these operations. She knew he would have lost both of his patients under the knife had it not been for her cooperation.

But her deepest pride of all was not selfish, but rather one which stemmed from her appraisal of Merrow's basic character.

In her father's case, he had risked his life to reach this homestead, to treat a patient he had never seen before. In bringing Bruce Bule to the Basin, Merrow had given of his skill and his God-given gift to save a man who had vowed to drive him out of this country forever.

Such a man, even among the medical fraternity, was rare and beyond price in the overall picture of mankind as she knew it.

Peggy primed the pump and filled bucket and kettle with cool mountain water. Back in the cabin, she had left Hal Merrow stretched out on a blanket alongside her father's bed, where he had promised to snatch an hour's sleep.

THE GIRL was turning away from the pump when she heard the crunch of gravel under a high-heeled cowboy boot. The sound startled her, for she had heard no rider come up from one of the neighboring homesteads, and the hour was nearing dawn.

"Peggy—I got to talk to you."

The girl dropped her water containers with a noisy splash. The big shape materializing from the direction of the nearby springhouse was unidentifiable under the stars, but she recognized that voice.

"What are you doing here in the Basin, Rolf?"

Hadaway moved up quickly. She thought she saw the glint of blue gunmetal in his hand. He had been drinking and the smell of whisky blended with that of tobacco and horse sweat on the man.

"The boss is in there? That Doc brung him here?"

Peggy's temples throbbed to the frenzied beat of her pulse.

"Yes. He'd been—ambushed down the canyon."

Rolf Hadaway's left hand closed over her forearm, pulling her closer to him.

"Did Bule pull through?"

"He's got a fifty-fifty chance, yes. Rolf, stop. You're hurting my arm."

"Did Bule tell the Doc who drygulched him?"

Peggy McCoy felt a sick panic run through her. Merrow himself had told her what had happened down at the Circle B bridge. She knew why Hadaway had sneaked into the basin, to spy on this homestead cabin tonight.

He intended to finish the job he had started before sundown yesterday. He intended to seal any voice that could accuse him of attempted murder.

"Mr. Bule wasn't conscious when the doctor brought him here, Rolf. He's—sleeping now."

Hadaway pondered her words, seemingly unaware that she had not actually answered his question.

He said finally, "When the boss didn't show up at Circle B last night I thought maybe something had happened to him. Then I found his horse roaming around with blood on the saddle."

Peggy said, "Why did you come here? How did you know Doctor Merrow found him?"

The crushing pressure of the ramrod's hand tightened on the girl's wrist.

"It was a hunch. I figured Merrow would

be riding back out. I figger it was Merrow who plugged the boss."

"No, Rolf. It was some—unknown bushwhacker. That's all Dr. Merrow knows about it."

Hadaway released her arm abruptly. "Take me in there. I want to see how Bruce is making out."

The girl struggled desperately for some reasonable excuse to send Hadaway out of the Basin, knowing intuitively what the killer's reason for wanting to enter the homestead cabin was.

"No—you can't. Mr. Bule must not be disturbed."

Hadaway seized Peggy's elbow and swung her forcibly around, heading her up the path toward the cabin.

"I've got to see for myself that Bruce is alive, Peggy. I don't trust your medico friend."

There was no resisting the big cowpuncher. Peggy knew what she must do—scream a warning as they approached the cabin, to at least give Hal Merrow a chance to be awake when Hadaway made his appearance in her father's bedroom.

As if reading the girl's mind, Hadaway reached up to clamp a huge palm over her mouth, at the same time propelling her roughly through the open door into the warmth of the kitchen.

DIM LAMPLIGHT glowed from the room where Hal Merrow was keeping vigil over his two patients. Hadaway headed toward that doorway, literally carrying the girl so that her booted feet could not advertise their coming.

They were at the bedroom door now. Hadaway was breathing stertorously as he stared at the two motionless figures on the quilt-covered bed—Bruce Bule and Ted McCoy side by side, sleeping peacefully. Sworn enemies sharing the common democracy of death's close approach.

Then Peggy's teeth sank into the horny tissues of Hadaway's rope-callused palm and the outlaw cried out involuntarily, flinging her bodily from him into the bedroom.

"Damn you—"

Hadaway mouthed the imprecation as he stalked into the full glare of the shaded, low-trimmed lamp, a heavy Colt sixgun clutched at waist level as he swept the room in search of Hal Merrow.

Peggy, lifting herself off the floor where Hadaway's violent shove had thrown her, started to scream and then she saw that the blanket where Merrow was supposed to be resting beside the bed was empty. Then she heard Merrow speak.

"Over here, Hadaway. You were looking for me?"

Merrow's voice came from the far side of the room. Rolf Hadaway jerked around, his gun whipping up as he caught sight of the doctor's tall figure standing alongside the oil-cloth covered table he had used for operating purposes twice in the past twenty hours.

Lamplight made a glittering ring out of the bore of the sixgun in Merrow's fist. The doctor's thumb was holding the Colt hammer at full cock, his index finger taking up the trigger's slack.

"I should have expected this, Hadaway," Merrow said quietly, his eye on the renegade's gun muzzle. "Drop the gun and turn around."

With a throaty exhalation, Hadaway let the big Colt drop to the floor. His arms started to lift, and then his left shoulder dropped and his left hand slapped down to his second .45, twisting the swivel-mounted holster up for a shot without the wasted motion of a draw.

Merrow lifted his thumb and the crashing roar of his father's historic Frontier .45 was like a cannon's blast in the log-walled confines of this room.

Over on the bed, Bruce Bule and Ted McCoy sat bolt upright, roused from slumber by the ear-riving concussion of Merrow's gunshot. They were in time to see the lamp flame recover to flood Rolf Hadaway's buckling form with brilliant light before it settled back to its subdued burning.

The crash of Hadaway's corpse hitting the floor shuddered the puncheons. But Hal Merrow's attention was not for the dead, but for the living.

He stepped quickly to the bed, his firm

hand pressing the two oldsters back to their pillows.

"Hadaway forced my hand," Merrow said huskily. "He came here with the intention of killing all four of us, I know that. It was his only chance to keep his own neck out of a hangrope."

Bule and McCoy turned their heads on their pillows to regard each other, simultaneously conscious for the first time. Then old McCoy's mouth twitched and he whispered to Merrow, "Reckon I'm delirious, Doc. What's Bule doing here?"

The Circle B cattleman answered the old nester's grin.

"Doc," Bruce Bule said huskily, "read McCoy—what I wrote—before you started digging for that slug."

Merrow turned to see Peggy McCoy coming toward him with the sheet of paper which she had stowed carefully on a wall shelf while Merrow had been making ready for the most fantastic surgical job of his career.

She turned up the lamp so that Merrow could read Bule's shaky scrawl:

To Marshal Jim Deckert and whom it may concern:

I was shot this date by my foreman Rolf Hadaway.

Regardless of outcome I hereby direct that my canyon blockade shall be forthwith lifted and right-of-way through Medicine Bow Canyon shall be open to High Basin settlers in perpetuity.

Hal Merrow looked up from his reading to see that both of the old men were sleeping once more.

HE JOINED Peggy McCoy outside the cabin. They stood watching the glory of the flaming sunrise spilling its brilliance into the green expanse of the basin, and it seemed quite natural for Merrow's arm to slide around the girl and turn her to face him.

When he bent his head, she raised her full lips to meet the hungry urgency of his own.

Later, with her cheek against his shoulder and the stubbled roughness of his jaw resting on the silken smoothness of her head, Hal Merrow heard the girl's murmur, "It seems as if I have known you always, Hal. It seems as if there had never been anyone else on earth but just the two of us."

Far across the Basin a rooster crowed lustily, and out in the McCoy barnyard another fowl made answer.

"The reason I was up and around," Merrow said, "when you and Hadaway came in—I was aiming to follow you down to the well and tell you that I have been hunting you all my life, Peggy. And now that I've found you, I'll never let you go."

RANCH
FLICKER
TALK

*MOVIE NEWS COMING UP IN THE NEXT ISSUE*

•

A Review of Warner Bros.'

**THE WILL ROGERS STORY**

*FEATURING* WILL ROGERS, JR.

•

*PLUS* A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

GARY COOPER

*She was still floundering when he came rushing toward her*

# Incendiary Lady

*By Bill Burchardt*

*SHE WAS OUT AFTER TROUT—but she caught a saddle bum. . . .*

ABBY GALEN had dropped her line in just below the falls. She was cane-pole fishing and her cork bobbled peacefully in a still pool where the roaring mountain stream eddied back among the rocks. But Abby stood in rushing water, bitterly cold from higher melting snows, which numbed and hid a pair of mighty pretty legs.

Her jeans were rolled up above her knees, and the rocks beneath her bare feet were cold and axle-grease slick. There was little warmth in the morning sun, but it did cast her reflection where the water eddied deep and blue; five and a half feet of jeans and open-throat shirt, strikingly well-filled with a hundred and fifteen pounds of sodbuster's daughter. And a face that would have been remarkably pretty if it hadn't been so scrootched up with the pain of that cold water.

Abby was plain uncomfortable, shivering so that the fishpole shook too. Fishing was a man's business anyway.

She was about to decide she would just as soon go hungry for another evening and was ready to pull that line up out of the water when, suddenly, the cork bobber went under.

She did pull then, fast and hard, and sat down just as hard on the seat of her pants in that bitter cold water. At first she thought it was because her feet had slipped on the slimy green bottom. But then she knew better, for her cork bobbled back to the surface and floated politely off. Her line had been cut.

Some sharp, feminine instinct made her look back over her shoulder toward the rocks above the falls. She had been right. A rider sat there, his rifle still only half lowered from his shoulder. The roar of falling water had covered the crack of his shot, and now he raised his reins and the big appaloosa horse began to pick its way down among the clutter of boulders and loose rock.

Abby Galen decided right then that she was in one heck of a hurry. But fungus-slimed creek bottoms do not adapt themselves very well to girls in a hurry.

She was still floundering frantically, soaking wet to the skin and cold as a helping of frozen gelatin dessert, when that pair of ornate red-and-black cowhand boots came rushing out into the stream.

With a violent thrash of her shapely arms Abby rejected his help and clawed her way out onto the leafy bank. She turned then to watch him edge cautiously downstream after the broad gray Stetson she had dislodged in her flailing defense.

His straining fingers trapped it, and he looked up.

"Lady," he shouted, his face contorted with abject apology, "I'm plumb sorry. Them trees and bushes hid everything but your pants-legs and that fishing line. I thought you was just some trespassing nester's kid fishing in my water rights. I—"

She had to yell to be heard above the roaring water. "I am just a trespassing nester's kid, and I was fishing," she hurled angrily. "Now get back on your horse and get out of here."

She would have thought him handsome under any other circumstances, but now his jaw dropped. "But lady," he appealed. "This is my land. You hadn't ought to order me off—"

Abby chopped him short with another squeal of rage. "I guess it's worse for me to try to catch a fish in your silly river than it is for you to let those stupid long-horned cows of yours come over and tramp down our crops."

"No ma'am." He lifted his wet hat defensively. "I ain't got no objection at all—that is, I'm sorry about them cows—er—I'm plumb sorry about this happening like it—" His voice wandered off, lost, and the lanky cowboy gulped helplessly.

THE HEAT of anger was wearing off now, and Abby discovered she was tremendously cold. Her teeth were chattering musically and she began to shiver all over.

"W-W-Well," she stammered, "you might at least get out of the water."

He looked down at the stream swirling about his boot tops, then grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, I reckon I might as well."

He slogged out of the stream and, together, they moved off toward the brighter sunshine of the rocky slope, somewhat drawn together by their misery; her's physical, his of the spirit.

It was quieter here, and the sun had warmed the rocks a little. Abby sat down, her teeth still chattering.

He said desolately, "I've got a slicker on my saddle. Maybe it'll help." And he walked to get it, his boots squeaking wetly.

She sat down for a time with the slicker about her shoulders, then threw it aside. "The sun's getting warmer," she said. She glanced at her clothes and decided she was drying out a little—maybe.

He was still twisting his wet felt hat. "I'd sure like to introduce myself," he faltered.

"Humpf!" Abby countered coldly.

"My name's Zachary Taylor Neal," he offered abjectly. "Most folks call me Zeke."

"You look like a Zeke—" she began sharply, then something about the hurt look on his long, hound-dog face stopped

her. The faintest ghost of a smile crept across her lips.

"All right," she said gently, "I guess you've been sorry enough. My name is Abby Galen."

"Yes, ma'am!" He smiled broadly now. "I reckon we're all kind of strange around here. Time we was getting a little more sociable. I sure am sorry I had to ruin your fishing."

Abby was sure she was beginning to dry out now. The sun was getting pleasantly warm. "Oh, that's all right," she declared. "We didn't have anything in the house for dinner and I was sort of hoping a trout would be friendly."

"Well, gosh, ma'am—Miss Galen, that is," he said. "We can fix that easy."

"But my pole." Abby pointed downstream, where the rushing water had carried it completely out of sight.

"Why, we won't need that," he countered and, looking around, added, "Have you got a horse?"

"Yes," said Abby, and then she added with a sharp return of spirit, "I don't want you laughing at her either."

BY THE time they had ridden down out of the hills and crossed the fertile valley to the shanty where Abby Galen was homesteading with her ma and pa, Zeke Neal was carrying across his saddle a wild turkey, two prairie chickens, five cottontail rabbits, and a saddle pouch full of succulent young quail.

And Abby Galen knew that she was hopelessly in love.

"I'll help you draw this game, Mr. Galen," Zeke Neal said as soon as the introductions were over. "These birds eat sage leaves out here, and it won't take long for 'em to get mighty strong." He aimed his last question at Abby's rather skinny, hatchet-faced ma. "How do you like it out here in the west, Mrs. Galen?"

"Well," Ma Galen began nasally, "back in Illinois, maybe the country weren't so big and fancy, but a body did have neighbors, right friendly neighbors, too. Out here, seems like there ain't nothing but tramp cowhands."

Abby Galen felt her body turning prickly with embarrassment. She tried to think of something that might turn the conversation, anything to change the subject. But she knew how hard it was to stop her mother when she got started on the neighborly virtues of Illinois people. Ma had her hands folded under her apron now and was shaking her head in thin-lipped resentment.

"—grifters, we called 'em back in Illinois," she was saying sharply. "Out here they call 'em saddle tramps or chuck-line riders, or something. Land o' Goshen, plain cheaters, I call 'em. Taking up homesteads in the valley with no purpose but to sell 'em cheap, to that land agent Quentin. Why, it ought to be agin the law! Oh, Quentin'll make a pretty penny, I'll bet, selling 'em to poor settlers for sky-high prices—"

Ma Galen's voice seemed to run on endlessly, and Abby was alarmed to see her father look up now and peer curiously into the red, blushing face of Zachary Taylor Neal. The cowboy was fumbling with clumsy embarrassment, trying to pick the feathers out of a small quail.

Abby knew her father saw and easily understood the reason for Zeke Neal's embarrassment. Calvin Galen was a big, stoop-shouldered Illinois farmer, and Abby knew that trouble had really begun when her pa hulked-up now to his full height. The big homesteader's stare was accusing as he stood there, his hands bloody from his work.

"Young feller," he challenged bluntly, "you ain't one of Quentin's phony homesteaders, are you?"

Hesitantly, Zeke Neal laid the bird aside and stepped back. "Well—" he began.

Calvin Galen's angry condemnation grew visibly until his face was a thunderous black.

In fury he stormed at last, "By the Almighty, git off my place! You and them other three like you ain't satisfied to cheat honest settlers out of what's rightfully theirs. You let them wild cow-demons in on my fields to destroy everything I plant. Git! Ride before I kill you—and don't come back."

Galen flung out the last words as Zeke Neal, blanched with silent barely-controlled anger, thrust a boot into his stirrup.

Neal spun the appaloosa horse now and rode hard for the gate as Abby shook her father's hulking shoulders and cried, "Daddy, you didn't even give him a chance! You could at least have let him—" Provoked to stinging tears, she turned and ran into the log shanty.

*"As soon as it's time for wigwam cleaning you men all go on the warpath!"*

ABBY WAS able to let two days go by, and all that time she was plagued by dreamy thoughts of a tall saddle tramp who was too darned good looking to be stuck with an awkward name like Zeke. The dreams haunted her while she hoed weeds in the young corn, while she moved down long rows picking off potato bugs.

If her hands were never idle, neither was her imagination. She saw him again as he stood contrite and ridiculous in that cold mountain stream. She paused and giggled, remembering his confused, abject apology. Then she recalled his smooth-muscled assurance with that rifle. He could whip it to his shoulder and a prairie chicken's swift flight became a sudden burst of fluttering feathers.

He'd demonstrated that same cool accuracy with his .45 Colt too. It was almost as if he'd had a string tied to those darting birds to jerk them down at the instant his gun spoke.

Maybe he was showing off a little, she thought archly as she lowered her head to sort some more among those potato vines. They were still eating that game too, and every time they sat down to a meal of it, Abby twitted her pa a little about it.

Pa Galen didn't have much to say, and Abby wondered if he wasn't regretting his high tempered explosion just a little. Finally, when she began dreaming of Zeke Neal sliding his appaloosa horse in on a cloud of dust and wrapping her in his arms, then eating the supper she had cooked with her own little hands, Abby decided it was time to do something.

She saddled up the gray plow-mare she called Christina and headed back toward those falls. It was the purest coincidence that Zeke Neal happened to ride that part of the creek that day. What was more unusual, he told her, was that he'd happened to be riding through there yesterday too, and the day before that. An ornery bunch of strays that just wouldn't stay put in the low country—

Abby gave him her most trusting smile and sat back down on the rock she'd used to dry off on the other day. With all the sweetness of wild honey and the softness of moonlight in her voice, Abby asked him what he intended to do—once he finished proving up and sold out to Felix Quentin?

"Well, to tell the truth, ma'am—" Zeke pulled his makings sack from his shirt pocket and blew to separate the rice papers—"my friends and I was figuring to drift down into Texas and do some cow rustling."

"What!" Abby leaped to her feet, electrified.

"Yep," continued Zeke calmly. "They tell me Billy the Kid is doing right well over in New Mexico, stealing John Chisum's cows. Drifts 'em down across the Border and sells 'em."

Abby could feel the flush of rising umbrage. She knew when she was being kidded.

"You see, ma'am—" Zeke twisted the quirly together with a slow, one-handed roll—"your pappy was more right than he was wrong about me. I ain't quite the lily white caballero a sweet young gal like you is apt to take me to be." The match flared and found the end of the cigarette.

"Truth is, there's some 'Wanted' dodgers with my name on 'em nailed up over in the Nations. I sold fifty head of prime beef to a Sante Fé grading crew down there a few months ago. My intentions was good enough. I thought it was a clean herd. But I come to find out later them cows was the best cut of a herd my buddies had stampeded for that particular purpose."

ZEKE NEAL studied the blackened match for a thoughtful moment, then snapped it away. "You see, them three boys and Felix Quentin have got me by the short hair. That's why I'm in on this deal here. I figured it was better than ten years in Leavenworth."

Neal looked long and hard into her startled, incredulous eyes now, and said softly, "I'm hoping you'll keep your mouth shut about this to the local sheriff. But I figured you ought to know."

Abby stood there for a long time, smoothing the wrinkles out of the clean new jeans she'd ironed especially for the occasion. She could feel a hot mist in her eyes then, and suddenly it was real hard to see the jeans, let alone the wrinkles.

"Yes," she said quietly, "it's nice to know."

She looked up then, hot tears and all, and stared straight at his long, serious face and steadied her trembling lip enough to speak. "It's nice to know that a man is not only a land cheat and a cattle thief, but also a stupid fool and a dupe, before—before, you fall in love with him."

Some way or another, she found Cristina then and climbed onto her broad back and struck out down the slope at a hard, bone-jarring gallop.

Zeke Neal stood there by that rock and watched her out of sight. He dropped the cigarette and ground it out. There was the steady noise of the falls, the creek water rushing and rushing, and high in the tall Canadian pine and fir-spruce a vagrant wind whispered, ebbing and flowing like the surf of the sea. Zeke Neal knew that he had never felt more alone in his life.

He moved off toward the appaloosa horse and unknotted the reins from the creek-side willow. The big gelding nuzzled his shoulder as he turned, and Zeke rubbed the animal's forehead, remembering when that horse had seemed all the friend he'd ever need.

But, heck fire, he thought angrily, what was a man supposed to do—marry the girl then kiss her blithely on the cheek and say, "Good-by, dear, I'll be back in ten years. They've caught up with me for cow-stealing."

He stepped across the saddle and turned off toward the line shanty where he batched with Lou Self. He knew then that as soon as that claim proved up clear title, he was going to shake that bunch, if it took a shoot-out to do it.

WHILE he was still a half mile away from the shack, he saw that he and Self had company. The hammer-headed grulla mustang that Lippy had been riding lately stood hip-shot under the big cottonwood in the side yard. Beyond that was Felix Quentin's surrey.

Zeke rode on in, off saddled in the thick shade of the tree and slapped the appaloosa on the rump. The inside of the shanty smelled dirty-stale; a place where men have eaten and slept, and returned only to eat and sleep again.

The four sat around the slab table. Lippy, his scarred, twisted face a picture of the evil inside him. Lou Self, slovenly, dirty and fat. The Gink, empty-eyed, remorseless. And Felix Quentin, a powerful man, confident, smooth and guileless.

Soiled tin utensils and food leavings littered the table. Lippy's hard-to-take nasal kidding began as soon as Zeke entered the shack. "Well, howdy, lover-boy. How's that sweet little nester gal?"

Silently Zeke crossed to the stove. He helped himself to the cold beans and lye-strong coffee.

Quentin's frog bass croaked insinuatingly, "What's this I hear about you fraternizing with your neighbors, Neal?"

Zeke sat down on an empty box at a corner of the table. Slowly he chewed a mouthful of the mealy beans, restraining the rising heat of aggravation. His eyes crawled carefully about the group. This was neither the time nor the place for trouble. Felix Quentin took an ivory toothpick from his vest pocket and worked at his teeth.

"What's the matter with you?" Quentin said. "You look like your present company doesn't suit you any too well." He grinned knowingly.

Zeke Neal said nothing.

"Maybe them sod-squatters suit you better," charged Quentin.

Zeke Neal shook his head and managed a short laugh. "No better'n we suit them," he said.

"What do you mean?" Quentin rocked back on his chair legs.

After another swallow of the swill-like coffee, Zeke said, "They just plain don't like us for neighbors, or the country either. Mrs. Galen is ready to head back for Illinois any time."

"That so?" Felix Quentin set his chair down sharply now, and Zeke looked up quickly.

"Don't like this land of milk and honey?" Quentin meditated craftily. "Well, well." He looked at Lippy's twisted face. "You know, we just might be able to help Mrs. Galen out. You reckon, boys?"

Zeke left the last forkful of beans on the plate and pushed it away from him. "I ain't just sure what's in your mind, Quentin, but if it's what I think it is, you can let it lay, right there."

Felix Quentin bit a squat cigar and spit the end of it on the floor. He eyed Zeke coldly. "You're forgetting something, Neal. You're forgetting that I give the orders around here. You cross me and I'll have a little conference with our mutual friend Sheriff Orr that will head you straight for a federal pen."

Zeke gripped the table's edge until his nails cut into the wood. "Quentin, if you give them folks any trouble, I'll kill you." His breath came hot and short in his throat.

Felix Quentin removed the cigar from his mouth and muttered a contemptuous four-lettered word. And, in one violent thrust, Neal lifted that table and jammed it into Quentin's belly. Cigar and smoke burst from Quentin's mouth with a great grunt of pain, and his chair heeled over backward.

As Zeke stood now with drawn gun to discourage the remaining trio, something came to him. He suddenly recalled the violent temper he'd seen Calvin Galen display.

Felix Quentin lay gasping, his waistcoat stained with splotches of spilled beans and coffee. Zeke strode out of the shanty and whistled shrilly for the appaloosa horse. He knew he had to warn Calvin Galen of coming trouble, in time to prevent the homesteader from doing some fool hotheaded thing that might cost him his life.

HALFWAY across the valley in the Galen homestead cabin, a meal had just been finished too—wild turkey and dressing, turnip greens and dried apple pie.

"That's the last of the bird, Pa," Ma Galen had announced regretfully.

She'd gone out with him then to help swing the leather-hinged doors on the new barn Pa Galen had just completed. Abby was finishing the dishes when she first heard the crescendoing gallop of a hard ridden horse.

The dish towel paused in its rapid motion and she stood still, her head cocked alertly. Then she plopped dish and towel down beside the kitchen pump, grabbed up her skirts and hurried toward the porch.

The appaloosa slid to a stop in a flying cloud of dust as she thrust through that door, and Abby Galen was taken aback with the similarity between that scene and something she'd dreamed once. But Zeke Neal was on the porch then, holding her arms roughly.

"Where's your pappy?"

"He's—" Abby gulped, flustered, and tried again. "He's—"

And then the angry hail came from the direction of the new barn. Calvin Galen was running through the yard waving a claw hammer and shouting, "You young smart-alec! I thought I told you—"

Zeke cut him short. Jerking his head toward the house, he ordered, "You'd better fort up, Galen. I think trouble's headed your way."

Calvin Galen brought himself to a halt, his face suddenly gone gray.

Zeke called, "Mrs. Galen, come up here to the house." He turned back to Calvin Galen who seemed rooted there, drawn and pale.

"I'm going back to cool my horse a little," Zeke announced calmly, "then I'll be in to help you."

Ma Galen came up now, clucking excitedly. Zeke led his horse to the tank and slowly-creaking windmill behind the house. While the horse drank from the sun-warmed water, Zeke climbed the windmill. Far off, he could see a patiently approaching dust spiral.

But, as he watched, the faint dust funnel turned off toward the right. Zeke Neal knew where he stood then, for that turnoff was the main trail toward town and the sheriff's office.

He climbed down now and drank from the cooler water as it flowed through the wooden trough to the tank. Tendrils of green moss wavered gently in the flowing water.

He took off his hat, washed his face and soaked and plastered down his hair. Somehow, with the gray threat of a federal prison seeming near, little things like moss and cool water got more important than usual. Thoughtfully, he loosened the appaloosa's saddle girth and hung the stirrups over the horn.

"I'd sure like to take it plumb off, big hoss," he said, "but we might be in some of a hurry when we leave here." He turned toward the house then.

ABBY MET him just inside the door. "We want to thank you for coming to help us, Ze—er, Mr. Neal," she said softly.

Calvin Galen offered a hand. "I want to apologize, Neal. I reckon I plain jumped afore I was spooked."

Zeke Neal shook that broad, callused hand but he waved away the apology. "We'll have a little longer to wait," he told them.

"Wait? How come?" asked Galen.

"They're making a little side trip into town first," Neal replied.

"Into town?" queried Abby. Then, "Oh," she said gravely, "to tell Sheriff Orr on you."

She had apparently told her father the whole story, for Calvin Galen said, then, "Son, you go and get on that horse and kite out of here. We'll handle that bunch if they make trouble."

Zeke Neal shook his head. "No," he said, "but I want a promise from you, Mr. Galen, that you'll stay right here in the house and hang onto your temper, no matter what happens. They'll probably make a lot of noise and try to rile you. But get in their way and they'll kill you. I know that bunch."

"Well, now, I won't let them bullyrag me," Galen bowed his neck belligerently.

"You want your wife and girl to bury you out here?" Zeke demanded. "There's four of them, and two of us. Don't forget that!"

"I can load," Abby chirped defiantly.

Zeke grinned down at her with a sudden, unhindered warmth of affection. "There ain't gonna be no shooting from here, little lady, 'cepting the lead gets so thick we can't dodge it."

"You mean we can't fight?" Abby demanded.

"No, ma'am. That bunch, we can't fight."

"But the sheriff," blurted Calvin Galen.

"If you stay alive," Zeke cautioned, "the sheriff may be able to help you. After he gets finished tracking me down," he finished dismally.

Morosely, Calvin Galen moved to a window and sat down. Zeke figured he was ready to do as he was told. And now the hours crept by, hours that grew slowly and swelled until they seemed to burst with the tension.

THEY WAITED, one hour upon another. Approaching six o'clock, the tortuous suspense broke apart in Calvin Galen. The brawny homesteader flung himself away from the window through which he watched. He thrust an impatient hand through his hair and slammed the table with his fist.

"Hell's fire! Fork that horse of yours and ride, Neal, while you've still got a chance. They ain't coming here noways. They're out combing the brush after you."

Zeke Neal calmly squinted through the door at the dropping sun. "Well," he drawled. "I'll wait till dark. If they ain't showed up by then, I'll mosey. Have a better chance of getting away in the dark anyway."

And so the waiting continued. Zeke rolled and smoked, carefully flicking the gray ashes into his boot top. Calvin Galen catprowled from window to door to window. Ma Galen violently laced and interlaced her nervous fingers.

Abby Galen kept up a pretense of house work, sweeping and dusting the room like a restless shuttle, while Zeke followed her with his eyes. Occasionally their eyes would meet with seeming aimlessness, and Abby would blush sharply as her gaze fell away to renewed attention on her work. Dusk came creeping through the cabin with the infinite peace of twilight.

With the gathering darkness, Abby became gradually quiet, until at last she was lost to Zeke, in some dark enshrouded corner of the room. Through the open door then came a faint sound which was not a common part of the night.

Zeke arose quickly as Calvin Galen spoke, his voice hoarse from the long silence. "Come here, son."

The quavering yip-yip of a lone coyote glanced off into the silence. Zeke crossed to Galen's window and against the pale nakedness of the peeled-pole fence, he saw a nebulous, moving, white shape.

A wild, rending shriek of pure terror scraped open the calm then, and Zeke swept across the cabin to see a similar shape of whiteness loom up near the new barn. Zeke crouched there, taut with wariness, as the wavering shape drifted into the yard, wailing horribly.

From somewhere in the cabin then came Abby Galen's nervous giggle which rapidly turned into bright laughter. "Do you all still believe in ghosts?" she tittered.

Calvin Galen's chuckle became a guffaw. "Why them silly galoots! They're wearing bed sheets. You reckon they tooken me for some superstitious hillbilly?" He seemed half angry at the thought.

Zeke Neal grinned into the darkness, feeling a welcome flow of relief. "Well, if they want to play-act, I reckon we—"

Calvin roared again and this time there was no mirth in the sound. It was pure wrath.

"What's that skunk doing there?" he bellowed. "Why, he's—" and flame knifed up the side of the new barn.

ZEKE SPUN in time to see the sheeted figure against the blood red pyre. He was carrying in another armload of straw to feed the burning flames. Then came the thundering footsteps of Calvin Galen as he charged out of the cabin. Through the window, Zeke saw Galen clear the corner of the house, charging barehanded toward the sheeted figure.

The barn-burner dropped his armload then and ripped away the hampering sheet. In the angry glow of the blaze, Zeke had a momentary glimpse of Lippy's twisted face as the outlaw jerked his gun.

Zeke's elbow sent a showering cascade of glass as he swept his .45 from its holster. He fired even before Lippy's gun could level. And as Lippy collapsed backward with both hands clawing his chest, Zeke leaped through the broken window and ran after the insanely angry homesteader.

But a new crash of gunfire had brought Calvin Galen up short. Galen stood now, for the moment non-plussed, uncertain which way to go.

Zeke grasped his arm, hearing the rapid drum of a hard running horse approaching as he dragged the confused homesteader back toward the shelter of the cabin. A rifle shot burst from the other side of the

barn now and Galen jerked and sagged in Zeke's grasp.

The firelight was dying away. In its last uncertain flickering, Zeke saw Felix Quentin's bald head edge once more around the barn's corner. Quentin's cheek was sunk against his rifle stock as he aimed at the limp body Zeke supported. Zeke Neal fired a hip shot at that bald target and saw it hurled out of sight as Galen sank to his knees with a deep quivering groan.

Zeke had to holster his gun now, thrusting his hands beneath the heavy man's armpits as a horse pounded down upon them out of the darkness. Zeke dropped Galen to spin once more with a drawn gun. He was able to hold his fire by only the barest second as he caught the flash of a lawman's star on this rider's vest.

Sheriff Orr hit the ground, shouting. "What's going on here?"

Zeke stabbed his gun into holster and knelt over the hoarsely breathing homesteader, beckoning the sheriff with a single jerk of his head. Galen's shirt was sticky now with flowing blood. Together they carried him into the cabin.

Zeke waited in silence until Abby had washed and cleaned her father's wound. Then he drew his gun and laid it beside the lamp on the table.

"All right, Orr," he said calmly. "I'm ready to go with you."

Sheriff Norm Orr carefully parted his drooping mustaches and removed a chew of tobacco from his mouth. He placed the well-chewed tobacco on Galen's wound.

"That'll keep the pizen from getting a hold till we can git the doc out from town." He peered at Abby and her hand-wringing mother, and spoke soothingly. "He's gonna be all right now," he assured them. "That slug didn't tear up nothing but muscle."

Pausing, he drew a cut plug from his shirt pocket and wrenched off a new chew. "I'm going out and scout around," he announced. He stared directly at Zeke then as he ordered, "Stay put!"

When Orr had returned to the cabin, Calvin Galen spoke weakly. "My new barn?"

"Shoo," scoffed the sheriff. "It'd take a forge and bellows to set them green logs on fire. You got all wrought up about nothing, pardner."

With his finger tips, Zeke edged the gun on the table toward the sheriff. Somehow, he felt that he had to get out of there before the knot in his throat swelled up and choked him.

"Let's be going, Sheriff," he appealed.

The sheriff turned the full chill of his gaze on Zeke Neal now. "Why, young man, the feller I trailed out here to collect is lying out by the barn with a .45 caliber hole right square in the top of his bald head. Seems like he pulled off some kind of a bucket-shop deal back east. Anyways, the New York law wants him real bad."

"Felix Quentin?" Zeke asked dazedly.

"Yep." The sheriff spat an amber stream through the open front door. "He's been preying on my mind for a good while. I finally recognized him when he come to town this afternoon with some cock and bull story about you selling some beef he stole.

"I never could git the straight of what he was trying to tell me, but he must have stole the cows. That old grifter couldn't have got 'em any other way. You want to be more careful what kind of snakes you hire on with, son."

The leathery faced sheriff winked broadly at Abby Galen. "No sir, Neal, it looks like you won't get nothing outa this but the five thousand dollar reward the board of the New York Stock Exchange is offering for Quentin."

WHEN THE incredible amazement had settled in Zeke Neal long enough for him to control his surging emotions, he stared straight at Abby Galen. She stood across the table from him, her face gently bathed by the shadowy lamplight.

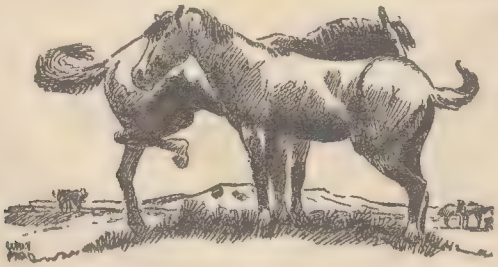
Zeke Neal would have understood the meaning of her suddenly shy smile, even if it had been less tremulous and lovable than it was.

Stammering with excitement, Zeke turned on Calvin Galen. "Mr. Galen, w-would you consider selling your place out

to me? You and your wife don't seem to like it out here none too well. With the two places and the free range up in the hills, I could run a fair-sized herd around here."

Calvin Galen, recovering now from the shock of his wounded arm, glanced at his wife and answered her smile with his own nod of agreement.

And, from the doorway, Sheriff Orr commented dryly, "I wouldn't be surprised if you young folks could buy up one or two more places around here, real cheap. I'm plumb certain I saw a couple of spooky-looking sheets take off over the hill while I was out there snooping around the barn. Might be a spook can even scare himself, if he's ornery enough."



# KNOW YOUR WEST

**1. I heard a cowboy say that he and his horse had got "all badgered up." What did he mean?**

**2. Homesteaders in parts of the Southwest dug most of their firewood out of the ground. Many still do. The roots of what shrub?**

**3. What does the name of Nogales, Ariz., mean, and how do you pronounce it?**

**4. Frank C. Robertson, author of good stories in RANCH ROMANCES for nearly 30 years, lives at Springville between Spanish Fork and Provo, near the Uinta National Forest, in what state?**

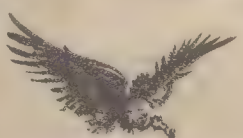
**5. Does the armadillo, that peg-toothed, hard-shelled bug-eater of Texas, lay eggs?**

**6. The former U. S. Biological Survey, well known for its outdoor activities in the West, now operates under what comparatively new name?**

**7. Which way would a catfish swim in the Pecos River from Pecos, Texas, to Pecos, N. Mex., upstream or down?**

**8. Which of the following gunmen of the Old West killed "Long-Haired Jim" Courtright, the "hammer-thumb" Marshal of Ft. Worth, Texas? Luke Short, Bat Masterson, or Wild Bill Hickok?**

**9. Can a U. S. citizen legally enter Mexico without a passport?**



**10. With a wing spread of as much as 10 feet, what bird native to California is said to be the biggest bird that flies?**

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

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You will find the answers to these questions on page 110. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

*She was near and bending over him*

# TRAIL OF NO

*HE'D ONLY BEEN LOOKING for a little excitement—*

*and now it was leading him into a lifetime of trouble*

*which meant the end of his fondest hopes and dreams. . . .*

# RETURN

*By Cy Kees*

RIGHT THEN, the wind moaning in the eaves was the most mournful music in the world. Johnny Tabor burrowed deeper into the hay, knowing that for a few hours, anyhow, he was safe.

Rain pelted the Kansas prairie outside, and it kept hitting the barn sides in quick rushes. It was pitch black inside, and he couldn't see anything in the haymow where he was hiding.

But then, nobody else could see him either, Johnny thought. And that was what he wanted. He had an old man's blood on his hands now, and the long outlaw trail stretched on ahead. A trail of no reward, and a trail of no return. Johnny bunched hay up in a kind of pillow to rest his head, and he tried to relax.

But it was no use. The horrible memory of old man Roberts collapsing in his own blood was still too clear. Knowing he was condemned to be a lone wolf for life, Johnny stared into the darkness.

He'd earned all the punishment he'd get, he thought, and now he didn't feel sorry for himself. With a bleak smile, Johnny remembered his father's last words.

"You take it cool and easy, Johnny. You got an itch for excitement. You watch that now, son. You're too frisky to go around looking for trouble."

Yeah, he'd gone looking for trouble and found a lot more than he wanted. He found himself saddled with a killing and a robbery to carry for life. On the outlaw trail, there was no way to shake those off.

Blowing stronger, the wind moaned a kind of melancholy dirge in the eaves and cracks of the weatherbeaten barn. The sound made him feel lonelier than ever, and he shut his eyes tight, trying to find sleep.

But he had never been more wide awake, even though his eyes were closed. He didn't know where he was, but he could find his way in the morning. It didn't make too much difference now anyhow. Still, it helped to have shelter against the stormy night.

All at once in the blackness a couple of hours before, he had stumbled onto this old feed barn, standing alone on the prairie. When he'd pushed open the door, the musty smell of molded hay hit his nose, and he knew this place wasn't being used any more.

That was fine for him because he knew he had to pick spots like this to stay. Quiet, lonely places where nobody else came.

He'd unsaddled in the dark and tied his horse to the manger down below. Then he'd crawled to the loft and burrowed his way into the moldy hay, to get what warmth he could in the chill weather. He was comfortable now, but the future looked bleak and forbidding. Still, Johnny didn't mind so much for himself. It was for Carol's sake, he realized, that he was really sorry.

If he'd only played square with Carol, he wouldn't have minded it so much. Now he could see her warm brown eyes in the wall of darkness, warm, loving—now suddenly terribly scared and begging him to come back.

But he couldn't go back. He was an outlaw with blood on his hands, even if it hadn't been his hand that did the shooting. And yet, it seemed like such a short time ago that he was so wonderfully free.

IT WAS about two days ago, Johnny remembered, before he'd joined forces with Bode Heilery and Speedy Nelson and High Red. First Bode with his bold bullying, and then joined by Speedy with his flashy good looks and High Red. High Red with his two guns.

But it was only Bode and his own damnable fear that got him into it. Now, in the darkness, Johnny's thoughts returned to that first fateful meeting with Bode. He was having a high time in the Blue Lamp Saloon when Bode ambled up and slapped him on the back.

"How're you, Johnny," Bode said in that low, heavy voice of his. "How's tricks?"

"Not bad, Bode," Johnny said.

It pleased him that Bode would come up and talk to him. They always said the only people Bode Heilery was friendly to were people he was scared of. Grinning, Johnny squeezed to his left and made another space at the bar. Tossing off the drink Johnny handed him, Bode ordered a couple more.

"Things is sure getting quiet around here," he said heavily, his green eyes shrewd and glittering. "Never no trouble with the pantywaists in this town."

"Yeah," Johnny agreed. Ordinarily, he didn't mind having it peaceful. But with the raw whisky burning his middle, and with big Bode Heilery beside him, he felt restless.

"Yeah," he said again. "Sure would like to drum up some excitement."

"You mean that?"

At the odd tone of Bode's voice, Johnny swiveled his head quickly and studied the man. The glitter in Heilery's eyes was ugly now, alive with meanness. Johnny took a deep breath and felt his head whirl from the whisky.

"You're damn right," he said. "Sure I mean it."

Somehow, instinctively, he knew he was talking too much. Bode was tough, a merciless bully, and men avoided him. But now Bode ordered more drinks.

"Then you're just the man I'm looking for." Bode studied him, and Johnny met the green eyes squarely. "Been watching you for quite a while, and I figured you'd want in with me."

"I ain't said I wanted in on anything yet," Johnny protested. He thought of Carol Lassiter then, how helpless and scared she always was about him. "I never said that at all."

Bode stiffened. His green eyes glazed a little, and his thick lips puckered. "Oh," he said. Just the one word.

It was a waiting kind of word. And a warning word too. As if Bode was telling him to pick his side, but to be damned careful about it. Johnny shifted uneasily, and stared at his drink through whisky-fogged eyes.

"No offense, Bode," he mumbled. "Just thought I'd hear what you had to say before I agreed to anything." He hated himself for kowtowing to Bode, but right now, he didn't know what else to say.

"S'all right, Johnny," Bode said. His big bulk shifted. "You can tell when I don't like something. You know what happens?"

JOHNNY knew. He remembered too well what happened at the last dance when some puncher objected to Bode's dancing with his girl. He remembered the puncher's battered face after he'd answered Bode's challenge to take the argument outside. The puncher hadn't had a chance against Bode's ramming fists. Remembering, Johnny shivered, but he managed a shaky laugh.

"Yeah, I know you ain't one for taking anything, Bode," he said in a tone of friendliness.

Bode nodded, but he didn't say anything. He waited, and Johnny tensed with the sudden silence between them. Finally, Bode pushed away from the bar.

"Guess I had you misread, Tabor," he said in a flat voice. "Guess you're like the rest of these milksops."

"Don't feel that way about it, Bode," Johnny said soothingly. "To tell you the truth, the deal you're talking about interests me a lot." He grinned, and he hated himself for grinning. "If you'd just tell me a little more—what it's about."

"It's two little jobs, one hitting right behind the other," Bode said. "By the time we get finished, we'll have more money than you can make in ten years of punching cows."

His blood pulsing with temptation, Johnny stared at Bode through his bleary eyes. There was a sureness in Bode's heavy voice, a confidence that couldn't be denied. Before he thought it over any more, Johnny gulped his drink.

"Count me in on that, Bode," he said. "That's just what I've been looking for."

Bode's green eyes slitted, and his heavy face settled into a menacing stare. "There's just one thing, Johnny," he said slowly. "After you find out there's no backing down."

"You bet I won't," Johnny said recklessly. "Hell, I'd be a damn fool to if it's like you say. I'm in with you to the finish."

Bode grinned, and Johnny felt a thick arm close around his shoulders. An arm that he wished Bode would keep to himself.

"You be in my hotel room at eight tomorrow night," Bode whispered. "And I'll tell you all about it—partner."

Johnny nodded, and Bode lurched his way out of the saloon. In the din of the celebrating saloon crowd, Johnny thought of the deal he had made.

Vaguely it scared him, but it was exactly what he'd come to town to find. Something besides the dull routine of punching cows for Ben Lassiter, even if Carol Lassiter did improve the scenery considerably at the Rolling L. That reminded him, and Johnny sobered a little.

He was supposed to be on night guard on Lassiter's trail herd tomorrow night, he thought. And the way old Ben had been acting lately, he'd never let him off to go to town.

Johnny grinned at his own reflection in the back bar mirror. "All right then, by damn, I won't go back till I'm through with Bode," he muttered to himself.

He might have to do some fast talking to get his job back, he thought, but he could do it. Even though Ben didn't like his going with Carol, she could influence her old man into giving in.

Like always, thinking of Carol made him feel tender, deep inside. Carol was young and small and she loved him. He took horrible advantage of her, Johnny thought. He teased her. He was obstinate when she wanted him to do something.

He pretended he didn't care to have her around, when she was his one big joy on the Rolling L ranch. When she tried to get him to take her father's mountain ranch on shares, he rebelled. Still, she went right on loving him, as faithful as a little puppy.

Johnny smiled. Some day, he'd find a way to show Carol that he loved her even more than she loved him. Some day. . . .

Scowling at his empty shot glass, Johnny pushed away from the bar and staggered through the batwings. Still thinking of Carol, he registered at the hotel and dropped into a heavy sleep.

HIS HEAD ached the next morning, and the sun was shining through the fly-specked, dirty window. Right away, Johnny thought of the deal he'd made with Bode Heilery, and he groaned. Some way, he had to get out of that. He stared through the window at the dusty, deserted street.

An innate caution told him it wouldn't be that easy. As proddy as he always was, Bode wouldn't let him back out without making a row about it. Sighing, Johnny went down to the eating house and plowed through a tasteless breakfast.

One thing was certain, he thought. He had to find some way to take his turn on night guard. Old Ben Lassiter had been

mighty touchy about that herd, now ready to sell.

He was leary of rustlers and suspicious of everybody. When Ben told a man to ride herd on them, they didn't argue. They saddled up.

The front door of the eating house squeaked open, and Johnny looked up. Staring, he jerked himself erect. Carol Lassiter saw him and brightened. With quick, graceful steps, she crossed the room and stood beside him.

Ordinarily, he loved being close to her, seeing her long soft hair, her smooth complexion, the quick flash of teeth when she smiled. Now Johnny shifted uneasily, and he didn't look directly at her.

"Have fun last night?" she asked.

There was a coolness in her tone he didn't like. But looking at her, he saw the old ready warmth in her dark eyes.

Johnny shrugged. "Some," he said. He curled his lips in a tight grin. "You Ben's detective now, checking up on his riders?"

Carol flushed a little, but her brown eyes flashed in anger. "I don't think you need a detective to watch you," she said quietly. "Sometimes I think you need a nursemaid."

Her words stung, and Johnny glowered at her. Carol would never know how the routine ranch work irked him. It was the one thing she didn't seem to understand, that he needed the excitement of town life like another man might need a drink. He didn't answer her, and Carol's dark eyes became softer, warmer.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," she murmured. "Dad didn't know I came to town. I just wanted to make sure you'd be there to take your turn guarding the herd. You know he's terribly worried about that."

"Yup, I know," Johnny snapped. "More work for me and more money for him. The money, that's what he worries about."

"You could be working his other ranch for shares if you wanted to," Carol said, her brown eyes angry again. "After all, that's the way he started out, and he built—"

"Yeah, but everybody can't be as tight-fisted as he is," Johnny interrupted rudely.

Carol's full young mouth quivered, and he thought she was going to bawl right there. It softened him, and he palmed one of her small tanned hands.

"I didn't mean it," Johnny said quickly. He steeled himself against the thought of Bode Heilery. "Come on, and I'll take you back to the ranch. We'll watch those steers so close we'll know which one's got the most ticks."

Carol brightened, and she smiled. "Before you change your stubborn mind, let's go!"

Suddenly eager too, Johnny stood up and took her hand to leave. Then he spotted Bode Heilery turning in and pushing through the door.

SUDDENLY Johnny chilled and stayed right where he was. His green eyes bloodshot, Bode walked right up to him, looking crabby. But when he glanced at Carol, his thick lips parted in a grin.

"Why, hello, li'l honey," he said in a heavy drawl. "Where you been hiding yourself?"

Carol ignored him, and the smooth tan of her face darkened with color. Bode's grin widened, and he reached out to pat her shoulder.

"What's the matter, honey-babe?" he asked in mock hurt. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

Quick anger surged through him, and Johnny glared. "You let her be, Bode," he snapped.

"Let her be, eh?" Bode said softly, turning to him. "You don't sound very friendly about it, Johnny. Not like a partner should be."

"Partner?" Carol echoed in a shocked voice. Johnny winced, and he felt her dark eyes staring at him. "What does he mean?"

"Nothing," Johnny muttered, and he shot a warning glance at Bode.

Bode grinned back, enjoying his embarrassment. But the big man's eyes were cold and fishy.

"Nothing, Johnny?" Bode asked, and there was a grim threat in his voice now. "You mean you ain't with me?"

It was showdown. Johnny breathed hard,

and he could see no way out of it. All he wanted was to get Carol out of there, away from Heilery.

"I'm with you, Bode, sure," Johnny said, coming to a quick decision.

He turned to Carol, and he tried to sound casual and easy. "You go back to the ranch, Carol," he ordered. "I got a little business with Bode, and I'll be along later."

"You come now, please, Johnny," Carol said. Her voice was small, scared, and she kept shooting sidelong glances at Bode. Johnny didn't want to get tough with her, but he had to get rid of her, fast.

"Beat it, baby," he said harshly. "I'll tell you all about it later."

"Please, Johnny," Carol pleaded once more, her face crimson now.

Scowling, Johnny turned his back on her then, and he left the eating place with Heilery. Bode swaggered down the rough walk beside him, and his eyes were closed to twin slits.

"You step easy now, Johnny." Bode patted the .45 Colt riding his side. "You make things hard for me all the time. I don't like that."

Johnny nodded. "Sure, Bode, from now on, you're boss."

He hated himself for saying it, for having anything more to do with this big man who was a drunkard and a bully. But to cross Heilery now would mean fighting him, and Johnny recoiled from the idea of that. The least he could do was see what Bode's deals were, and then slip out just as soon as he got the chance.

Uneasy and restless, he waited impatiently through the day at the Blue Lamp Saloon. Thunderheads rolled up during the afternoon, making the sky black and ominous. Jagged lightning appeared over the horizon, and the rain smell came strong with the suddenly cool breeze.

"Hell's going to break through the roof," Johnny muttered uneasily. He should be out at the ranch, helping to hold the herd.

Finally he started pacing up and down the now deserted street. Long before eight o'clock, he sidled up to the door of Bode Heilery's hotel room.

THERE were three of them inside, and they had a whisky bottle on the bureau. Breathing raw fumes, Bode introduced them. High Red was tall and lean, and all Johnny noticed real close were the two guns he carried. Speedy Nelson was darkly handsome, and when they shook hands, his hard brown eyes were friendly.

They all sat down, and Johnny drank deep from the whisky bottle. With the liquor flaming in his stomach, he started getting more eager to hear what Bode had in mind. Bode jerked his head at the other two men.

"They helped me plan this," he said, "so they know what to do. We want you more for the second deal, Johnny, but we're ringing you in on the first cause you're our partner now. You savvy?"

Johnny nodded and took another drink.

"You know old man Roberts?" Bode asked, watching him through slitted eyes.

Johnny nodded. Everybody knew old man Roberts. Half loony, he was, the old saddlemaker. Always friendly too, but he was tight, and gossip said he had the first dollar he'd ever made.

"We got it figured that he's got his pile around the house," Bode said, lowering his voice. "Hell, it ain't doing him no good, Johnny, and us boys can sure use the money."

It shocked him, the idea of doing outright robbery, but in a way Bode was right. Anyhow, he couldn't back out now.

Johnny licked lips that were suddenly dry. "And the second deal?"

"That's the biggest and best." Bode laughed. "Got a place all fixed up to rest and get ready for it. But you'll find out about that if you help us right on this one. Ain't that it, boys?"

High Red laughed, a dry, humorless laugh like rustle of dead leaves. Speedy Nelson grinned.

"Hell, Johnny's a good scout," he said "You don't need to worry about him."

Johnny felt himself being sucked into it. He tried hard, but he couldn't think of a way to get out of it.

He glanced at Bode. "You—you won't hurt old man Roberts?"

"Hell, no," Bode said. He laughed. "Course, he wouldn't want to go and get foxy on me."

While Johnny waited in an agony of dread, they finished the bottle of whisky. Near midnight, they made their way to old man Roberts's house.

"Keep a handkerchief around your face," Bode said, low-toned, just before he forced the door and led the way into the darkened house

They lit the lamp and were searching through the kitchen cupboards when old man Roberts burst into the room. His faded blue eyes blazed with anger at what they saw.

"Get out, all of you!" he yelled, voice quivering with rage. Staring at the corner, his eyes bugged.

"No, not that!" he screamed then, and Johnny looked to see what the old man was yelling about.

Going through the flour bin, Bode Heilery had scooped out a covered can. Tearing off the lid, he uncovered the bills, stuffed in the can so tight, they bulged out the top.

"That's my money—I worked hard for it," Roberts cried. Looking around desperately, his faded eyes lighted on the wood box. He ran for it and clawed out a big chunk of stove wood.

"I'll show you," he yelled, and dove for Heilery who was stuffing the bills in his pocket. Roberts's skinny arms flailed, and he hit Bode a wicked lick behind the head.

"Damn!" Bode snarled. His thick lips puckered.

Very deliberately, he pulled his .45 Colt and shot Roberts in the stomach. Roberts clutched at the hurt and collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

They had to run fast then.

GALLOPING out of town, they heard the buzzing in the street behind them—the querying voices. Feeling sick with shock, Johnny had to run with them.

With his action, Bode Heilery had branded them all. The outlaw trail stretched ahead, but all Johnny could think of was the scene behind them—old man Roberts lying in the pool of blood.

The thunderheads darkened the sky now, and jagged lightning streaked down. Johnny didn't know where Bode was heading, probably to the place where they were going to rest up, wherever that was. But he wasn't going to wait to find out. Grimly Johnny waited his chance.

They angled off to the right ahead of him, and he kept his horse going straight, not changing direction. He wanted to see the last of them now. He couldn't see ahead, but he kept going, going, going. Thunder cracked louder, and the rain started to fall.

Anyhow, he was free of them. He didn't know where he was, but he didn't care, really. He was lost and sick and scared to look ahead, and it was exactly what he'd asked for. Then, through the darkened night, he spotted the hulk of the barn.

Now, burrowed in the hay, with his horse below, Johnny listened to the moaning of the wind and knew the darkest moments of his life. It all seemed like a horrible nightmare, but he knew too well it was true. And his thoughts drifted to Carol.

Her slender loveliness haunted him now, and he wished bitterly he had listened to her. It was losing her that hurt the worst of all. Tears burned his eyes, and Johnny laid his head back on the hay.

The wind rushed against the barn walls, and its savage gusts brought alien sounds to his ears. Johnny jerked to a sitting position and listened. He couldn't hear them now—then he did!

The soft drum of hoofbeats sounded through the rain-swept night. His heart pounded, and Johnny listened closer. They faded away, and he breathed again. Then came another gust of wind, and the hoofbeats came again, suddenly close. Right outside the barn.

Cursing silently, Johnny wondered desperately what to do. It was probably a posse from town, maddened by the cold-blooded shooting. He waited tensed, the rough hay under his hands. If they came inside, they would see his horse. But he couldn't try to saddle up and get away any more.

SADDLE leather creaked outside. The door squeaked on rusty hinges, and crouching in the molded hay, Johnny recognized the low heavy voice. Bode Heilery!

Struck by the irony of it, Johnny shook his head in silent despair. Thinking he had found refuge, he had found the exact place where Bode was heading. The place where he'd said they'd rest up.

"Hey, look, a horse!"

Johnny recognized High Red's voice below. There were alarmed murmurs. Then a low-voiced order from Bode. A lantern cast a gloomy light below. Rustling sounds and then silence. In an agony of suspense, Johnny waited.

"All right, yellow-belly!" Bode's heavy voice sounded from below. "We're all hid out and ready to gun you down the minute you show your face. Come down without a fight and we'll give you a chance to talk."

Johnny hesitated a moment, knew he was lost. "I'm coming," he muttered.

Leaving his gun in its holster, he stepped onto the ladder. His back chilled all the way down, fearing an ambush slug, but none came. Bode stepped out, his .45 leveled.

"Now you'll find out how we treat quitters," he rasped. His thick lips puckered in a brutal knot, and Johnny braced himself for a bullet.

"Hey, wait a while and give him a chance." It was Speedy Nelson, his handsome face showing a tinge of concern. "Remember, he did ask if we'd leave Roberts alone."

"All right, talk then," Bode Heilery snapped. "I should sink a slug in his gut right now."

Johnny took a deep breath. "I didn't like you gunning old man Roberts down," he said outright. "You promised you wouldn't hurt him."

"See, I told you that's why he quit us," Speedy Nelson said. "That was a dirty low trick, and—"

"Shut up," Bode snarled. He was silent for a long moment while Johnny waited breathlessly. "You aiming to take up for that crazy coot?"

"No," Johnny said quietly. "That's over and done with now."

His brow furrowed, Bode lapsed into thought. After unsaddling, High Red dug a kerosene stove from where it had been hidden in the manger. Digging farther, he brought out tinned food and started making a meal. While Johnny waited in sick suspense, Bode rubbed his whiskered chin. Then he glared.

"If we didn't need you so bad for our plans, I'd gun you down right where you stand," he said scowling. "But seeing as how we need you, you want one last chance?"

"You bet I do, Bode," Johnny said hopefully. "I'll side you on this next one."

"Here's what it is," Bode said, his green eyes staring hard, shrewdly. "We're getting that trail herd old man Lassiter's got bunched up all nice and handy. I got an Indian agent down in the Nations anxious as hell to get them. He's got the money—" Bode's voice trailed off. "What the hell's the matter, Tabor?"

Sweat broke out on his forehead, and Johnny's muscles tightened to stiff knots. He thought of Carol, what robbing her father would mean to her.

Johnny swallowed hard. "Bode, go to hell!" he barked.

Throwing himself hard to the left, he clawed for the six-shooter still in his holster. Bode's .45 crashed deafeningly in the barn, and the horses plunged in fear. One of them hit Bode from behind, and he sprawled in a corner.

Johnny pulled his gun loose and hesitated. Speedy had drawn, was not shooting. High Red leveled both his, and Johnny squeezed a shot at him.

It jackknifed High Red, and he pitched under the horse's hoofs. Again Johnny hesitated, barrel lined on Speedy Nelson, and again he didn't shoot. Speedy wasn't shooting.

"Damn you," Bode screamed, and his .45 exploded deadly flame. A hellish blow hit him in the shoulder, and Johnny slammed backward, in blinding, pulsing pain.

It made him sick and dizzy, and he

wanted to quit. But he reared back to a sitting position and lined his gun on the far corner. Four times, he shot in regular squeezes, straight into the burly figure in the corner.

Bode Heilery cursed, then screamed, then he stiffened. Finally, with the last shot, he quieted.

"Damn!" Speedy said, staring at the two still figures. "Damn!"

He saddled a horse and led it toward the door. Numbed with pain, feeling hot liquid running down his stomach and back, Johnny stared at him. At the door, Speedy looked back, and there was a glow of admiration in his eyes.

"I'll send help for you, Johnny," he said. "Then I'm getting to hell out of this part of the country." He opened the door, and a harsh command sounded from the blackness of the night outside.

For a long moment, Speedy Nelson froze. Then his right hand dipped downward. Spots of flames mushroomed all over in the darkness outside, and the heavy crash of guns with them.

As if struck by a giant gust of the wind, Speedy was flung back, crashed to the ground. Men closed in on the building. Blinded with shock and pain, Johnny swam n oblivion, but vaguely he knew they were all around him. Then he heard Speedy.

Speedy was saying he was scared to die. And he spilled the whole story while his voice became weaker and weaker.

Listening, Johnny smiled. Probably ashamed of his own shoddy life, Speedy wanted to help Johnny back to decency, away from the outlaw trail. Johnny heard himself whitewashed, excused, apologized for—until Speedy could talk no more. Then Johnny could no longer stay awake.

WHEN HE did wake up, his shoulder was heavy with bandage. Clean sheet smell was in his nostrils. Ben Lassiter was beside the bed talking. Johnny couldn't hear him too well, but he picked up most of it.

"—When Carol insisted we keep an eye on you so's to keep you out of trouble—Nelson said you didn't know what it was all about." Johnny tried to shake his head, but he couldn't. "Judge thinks he can get you off in a matter of months." Ben Lassiter scowled then. "Hope you got your gut full of excitement." He stomped out of the room.

"I got enough to last three lifetimes," Johnny mumbled to himself. "If I get the ranch now, I'll never go to town again."

Then he spotted Carol in the corner, looking the other way, and he knew she had heard.

He raised his voice. "That is, if someone real sweet will still share it with me?"

Carol looked around, and she smiled, the old tender smile. In five quick steps she was near and bending down over him.

"I guess you'll never get to town, Johnny," she whispered in his ear.

And pressing close the warmth of her cheek, Johnny knew he was really back. From the trail of no return.

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# KNOW YOUR WEST

*(Answers to the questions on page 101)*

1. He meant that his horse had stepped in a badger hole and fallen with him, probably hurting them both.

2. Mesquite, which grows more wood under the ground than above it.

3. Nogales (No-GAHL-ace, commonly mispronounced No-GAL-ess) means "walnut trees."

4. Utah.

5. No. Its four young are born alive, each litter usually all of the same sex.

6. U. S. Fish and Wild Life Service.

7. Upstream, about 350 miles.

8. Luke Short.

9. Yes. For a stay under 24 hours no paper of any kind is required. For up to 30 days a tourist card is sufficient. For longer periods a regular passport is required.

10. The California condor.

# Marryin' Trouble

## By Bob and Jan Young

MISS ELEANOR BERRY laid down the spelling lessons disgustedly. There was no denying that Miss Berry was discouraged. Maybe it was the lure of the wealthy miners going womanless in the northern gold fields; maybe it was the skimpy matrimonial prospects available in the small town of Gilroy. But she couldn't deny she was tired of being a schoolteacher, tired of a lonely, single life. And at twenty-two, she wasn't getting any younger.

That night with a determined set to her chin she answered the ad in Hutching's Literary Journal: "Lonely miner wants wife to share stake." She was an ardent devotee of Hutching's Magazine, and figured that any miner who patronized the finest of California's magazines must be a gentleman.

A few weeks brought an enthusiastic reply from the Grass Valley Romeo, Louis Dreibelbis. Letters flew back and forth as fast as train and stage could carry them. The date for the wedding was set. Miss Berry closed school in June, 1873, and with ill-concealed relief bid good-by to the Gilroy swains.

She made a brief stopover in San Francisco to buy her trousseau. The frilly garments were packed lovingly in a sturdy Saratoga trunk and checked aboard the overland train. Shortly before dusk on a sultry summer evening the train labored into the mountain town of Colfax. Her long-handled parasol gesticulating with concern, she supervised the transfer of the trunk to the waiting stagecoach.

Bob Scott, the driver, grinned happily when he saw his passenger. "Mighty proud to have you with us, ma'am. Reckon you be the bride for Grass Valley?"

Miss Berry hardly heard him, she was so busy seeing that the Saratoga was properly secured atop the stage. Only when she was certain that the trunk was safe did she remember to blush prettily.

"Thank you, sir. I deem it an honor, too," she murmured in best schoolteacher etiquette.

Scott handed the lady passenger to the seat of honor beside him. The remaining twelve passengers scrambled to arrange themselves as they saw fit. Among them were U. S. Senator Sargent; E. Black Ryan, railroad paymaster; Judge McFarland, railroad attorney; and Brigadier Charles Cadwalader, railroad engineer. Rumor had it the latter were escort for a shipment of money to Nevada City.

With a crack of Scott's whip the team plunged forward, the coach careening wildly the ford of Bear River.

Scott flourished the whip dramatically

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*The True Story of a Strange Western Wedding*

for the benefit of his passenger, and used it as a pointer for a monologue on the surrounding scenery. Miss Berry smiled at the proper places, but from time to time she consulted her lapel watch worriedly.

"Now don't you be worrying, ma'am. Your bridegroom ain't going to run away." Scott gave her a sidewise look. "No, by Gawd, he'll be waiting till doomsday, or he's a danged fool!"

"I hope so," Miss Berry ventured.

DUSK SETTLED over the hills and scrub lengthened into white pine. Five miles out of Grass Valley the coach reeled past the gate of the Sheets ranch. Wheels screeched to a stop, Scott's hands whistled skyward, and Miss Berry added a scream to the concert. Five armed men stepped from the shadows, their faces hooded in shoulder length masks.

Scott regained his composure and attempted a guileless smile, "Tough luck boys. Express box is on the next stage."

The leader of the bandits was unimpressed by the stall. "Well, we can all wait then." Slowly the minutes crept by.

Finally Scott melted. "Okay, you win. There ain't no other stage. I got a young lady here due to be married in Grass Valley today."

The passengers were herded out of the stage. It was an overland coach of the type that carried a built-in iron box under the rear seat. The bandits unhitched the team and produced dynamite caps and blasting powder. Four set about laying the charge, while the fifth stood guard. General Cadwalader made a sly move toward the derringer in his vest.

"Ever see a man more nervous than me?" The bandit guard faked a trembling fit, juggling the gun dangerously. The general's hands lifted. Miss Berry gasped.

By now the charge was fixed. Miss Berry's eyes lifted and she let out a piercing shriek. "My trousseau, my beautiful trousseau!" She pointed to the Saratoga trunk. "Please take it down before you blow up the coach."

"All right, lady." One of the robbers handed the trunk to the leader. He in turn deposited it at the feet of Miss Berry, and his sleeve flicked back momentarily, revealing a long, irregular scar on his wrist.

A moment later the top of the coach splintered with the blast. The bandits scooped some seven thousand dollars from the ruptured strongbox and vanished.

Scott hitched the team. He assisted Miss Berry and her trunk to the still intact driver's seat. The other passengers clung as well as they could. A half hour later they bounced into Grass Valley.

Miss Berry was met by a buxom woman, her intended's landlady. "Poor Louis isn't home yet. He works such long hours," she explained, steering Miss Berry to her house. Then a horse clattered to the porch and a dark-haired man swung from the saddle.

"Louis!"

"Eleanor!"

The landlady left them in an embrace while she summoned the parson and two witnesses. The marriage was performed in the parlor. Afterwards, the parson laid the register on the marble-topped table. Louis took up the pen. His sleeve fell back revealing a long, irregular scar. Miss Berry screamed and fainted.

The next morning Bob Scott drove out of Grass Valley with a new coach, but an old passenger. Sitting grimly on the driver's seat was Miss Berry; beside her, the Saratoga trunk. All night she had sat in the parlor. Pleas failed to budge her.

By morning she had regained her composure and claimed complete amnesia as to any marriage ceremony. It was just as well, considering the bridegroom had already fled town.

Scott's efforts at conversation brought even less response on the return trip. Miss Berry sat stiffly, lips pursed in icy silence. Her thoughts no doubt were already on next semester's spelling assignment.

*Just then Dave Daw walked in*

# Billy's Keeper

*By Garold Hartsock*

***SHE WAS ALONE** and penniless and desperate—out in the wilderness with the rough man and the rougher boy*

THE TRAIN was late, and Patricia Norton paced with ladylike tread the packed cinders before the little yellow station. She kept her glance lowered to the tips of her high-laced shoes, so that the others waiting might not guess her closeness to tears.

The other travelers murmured among themselves. She could imagine what they were saying: Cy Norton's niece . . . Easterner . . . came out to Oregon to catch herself a rich husband . . . didn't make the grade.

The folks waiting for the branch line puffer saw a composed young woman tastefully dresed in a blue traveling suit and hat, gold watch pinned to her jacket. They spoke about her in private tones: lovely . . . very reserved . . . they say she's wealthy.

Patricia wondered just how long one

could eat on four dollars and twenty cents, for that was all she possessed after buying her ticket back to Philadelphia.

Down along the river she heard the train's wailing cry and presently saw the engine puff into view. A feeling of desperation descended upon her. She didn't like this land of mountains and vast rolling rangeland, nor the men in sweat-stained hats and clacking high heels, but she liked returning to Philadelphia, that city of stiff collars and distinct social levels, even less. She had no job, no prospect of a husband, and the uncaring city was jammed with girls in her very same situation.

She chose a red plush seat less dusty than most, brushed it carefully with her handkerchief, and sat staring unhappily out the smoke-grimed window.

She really hadn't come West solely for a husband, though she would not have run from an acceptable man. Rather she had come to try to find a life for herself in this land of opportunity. But the land of opportunity was sadly uncooperative. After two months, the relative Nortons had practically sighed in relief at her decision to return East.

She heard a shout and watched a team and rig careen into the station grounds. A man jumped out, a tall man in a tall hat. Run-of-the-mill rough man, common to this rough land, she thought. The man came in long strides toward the train, followed by a small bareheaded boy, running to keep up.

The man pushed his shoulders into the coach, then hurried down the aisle, giving each passenger a close stare.

"Looking for a Miss Norton," he announced.

She did not like his voice. It was hard, restless, with no time to waste.

She said, "I am Patricia Norton."

His sharp glance traveled down and up, stopping on her face. "No," he said, "you won't do. Cy Norton said you were an old maid."

The other passengers smiled. Patricia felt her face heating, but she used her most civilized tone on this ruffian. "I am twenty-five. Perhaps that qualifies me for the title."

The man was unabashed. "Cy said you had experience with kids. A governess, he said. I wanted an older woman, someone with gray hair and a firm hand. Sorry, miss." He turned abruptly and almost sprawled over the little boy who had been scowling at Patricia.

"Sweet hell," the boy roared. "Look where you're goin,' Dave!"

The passengers broke into laughter. The man said quite unperturbed, "Told you to wear your own shoes. You're clumsy as a cow, Billy."

PATRICIA saw, then, the boy's oversize boots, turned up at the toes in their largeness. She felt a sudden tug at her heart for this small cowboy. She also realized that here might be a job, and she intended to grasp this last straw.

She said, "Hello, Billy," and smiled.

The little boy stared at her, and suddenly thrust a hand under his coat. He hauled out a large firearm and pointed it directly at her. "Bang! You're dead!"

It was not a toy pistol. Involuntarily her hands flew up, and she gasped.

"No hammer, miss," the man said dryly. He grinned at her.

Even in that ruffled moment her perturbed mind recorded a contradiction to a previous thought. This man was not run-of-the-mill. He had steady gray eyes and a neatness to his worn range clothes.

The little boy holstered his gun.

Patricia swallowed. "My goodness, Billy." Then she said, "You wanted a governess, Mr.—"

"Dave Daw. I want a companion for Billy. You wouldn't like the place. We live on a hill ranch twenty miles from town. You don't look strong enough."

"I'm strong enough," she said.

He inspected her. She felt a warmth rising through her, followed by a coolness for his overlong stare.

"Can you ride a horse? Shoot a gun? Cook?"

"Of course," she said. Part of it was true. She could cook. She had never touched a gun. Horses were beyond her. Uncle Cy had given her up after a week of

the most terrible initation. For days she had eaten standing up.

"What is the salary, Mr. Daw?"

"Going wages for a hand. Forty a month, bed and board."

"I might consider the position," she said, "for sixty."

"Forty."

"Sixty," she said firmly.

Dave Daw frowned. He looked down upon scowling young Billy. "What you think, kid?"

"No."

"See here, when I'm off in the hills, someone's got to look after you, or they'll give you to Paul Overstreet."

"I'll look after myself. Or go with you. Dave, honest, we don't want no women around. They get sick and die."

Dave Daw' gray eyes softened as he looked down. "Your pa died too, remember. Women are all right sometimes."

"No," Billy said with finality. "I don't like her."

"Billy, we could be very good friends," Patricia said.

Dave Daw seemed to come to a decision about her. "Sixty a month," he said, "if you want the job."

The conductor's long-drawn warning interupted them. "Bo-oarrd!"

"My baggage," Patricia cried, digging in her handbag for the checks. "Two suitcases. Hurry, please."

"Stay here, Billy."

DAVE DAW charged out of the car. To start the job right Patricia showed her nicest smile to this small orphaned cowboy. She took him by one rigid arm. "All right, Billy," she said gaily.

"Woman, let me go." It was astonishing to hear such venom in four quiet words.

"Why, Billy," she said. The next instant an oversized cowboy boot collided with her ankle. The pain was intense. Rather dimly, she heard the thump of escaping ill-shod feet.

She caught at the seat and stayed erect, waiting for the pain to subside. "My goodness," she said to the amused passengers.

She walked with great dignity out of the car that had been going to start her back to Philadelphia. . . .

"I hope you don't regret this, miss," Dave Daw said as they drove off.

Patricia gave no indication that first doubts had already assailed her. She looked back to where her two suitcases jumped and clattered.

"Be all right," Dave said with some impatience. "Pick up our grub and then fix things tight."

They stopped before one of the town's mercantiles. Dave Daw climbed down, tied his fire-footed sorrels to a rail and said, "Take awhile to get loaded, if you want to look around or buy anything."

"I'll wait here, thank you."

Daw entered the store. Billy gave her a black look and clumped down the sidewalk to a confectioner's shop. Patricia rubbed her ankle.

Presently Daw emerged with the storeman, each carrying two sacks of flour. They returned inside. Billy walked out of the sweet shop, cheek enlarged, a striped sack clutched in one grimy fist.

A man stepped out of a nearby store. He semed intent on the boy. "Hello there, Billy."

Billy looked at him. "The hell with you."

The man smiled. He was a large well-dressed man in a gray flecked suit, a string tie and spotless gray hat. He wore a small dark mustache and had very white teeth.

Patricia wanted to call a reprimand to Billy, but the man said, "Billy, I've got that Indian pony I promised you."

Billy stopped chewing but said nothing.

"All you got to do is come along and pick him up." The man seemed not yet to notice Patricia. "How about it? Right now. After all, I'm your uncle, same as Dave."

"I'll ask Dave."

"Oh, don't bother about that. Got a room all fixed up for you. And a stall for the pony. He's got spots—a real pinto."

"Well—"

"Billy!" Patricia called, not at all understanding her alarm.

The man quickly turned his head,

glancing from Patricia to the sorrels, then back at Billy.

"That's my governess," said Billy.

The man said casually, "Remember what I said, Billy," and advanced upon the rig. He lifted his hat upon a dark well-barbered head. "I'm Paul Overstreet. Billy's my nephew. Aren't you Cy Norton's nice?"

"Yes."

"Saw you once with Cy. You've not been long in this valley?"

"Not long," she said shortly, but found her reserve quickly thawing.

This man had manners, charm. He was the type no governess ever got to meet in Philadelphia. His dark eyes appraised her with gentlemanly interest.

"I must say—"

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Dave Daw with a huge box of groceries in his arms.

Dave dumped the box into the rear of the hack.

"You know what?" Billy yelled. "Paul's got a pinto for me."

"Told you to keep away from that boy."

Paul Overstreet smiled. "Scarcely the time for threats, Dave."

"Threats, hell," said Dave Daw. "I told you last time you tried to sneak Billy away—" He struck with his fist.

The blow caught Mr. Overstreet on the jaw, whirled him half around and dumped him in the dusty street. The clean new hat tipped off into the dust, too.

Mr. Overstreet lifted erect, rubbed his cheek and said quietly, "Dave, you've gone too far. Apologies, Miss Norton—"

Dave Daw slammed in another blow.

"Oh, no!" Patricia cried. A dreadful weakness hit her stomach as poor Mr. Overstreet groaned in the dust.

Daw said, "Come on, Billy," untied the sorrels and jumped into the rig. Billy piled into the rear atop the flour sacks and Patricia's suitcases. His eyes were bright.

"Man, Dave, teach me to fight like that."

THEY WERE well out of town, with the sorrels almost flying, Billy screeching in her car, and the wind next to tearing her out of the seat before Patricia found her voice. "Please. Please—" she cried.

Dave Daw seemed then to remember her. His jaw pulled in and his fingers tightened the lines. The sorrels slowed and came to a stop.

"I do believe," Patricia gasped, "that I prefer to go back."

"Train's gone." Dave Daw's gray eyes were scorning her.

Young Billy screeched, "Take her back, Dave."

Halted there in the dusty road, some remnant of courage returned to her. "I am not used to fighting," she said. "And if you drove slower, perhaps—"

"Better take you back," Dave Daw decided. "No place in the hills for a weakling." He shifted the lines.

"No, please," she said swiftly, and grasped his arm; it was like a post in size and density. "I'm sorry. Really, I don't want to go back. There's nothing—no reason to go back."

He studied her briefly, turned his glance to the sorrels and sent them forward, but he held them to a reasonable pace. Patricia remembered to let go of her employer's arm. Her face grew warm, but Dave Daw was intent only upon the road and the sorrels and looking stern.

"That's home," Daw finally said, and Patricia looked ahead where the dwindling wagon road they had followed for three hours ran completely out.

There was a house of logs, and beyond that the pole fences and corrals she had come to associate with all dwellings in this uncivilized land. A small stream, willow bordered, ran in the bottom near the house. All this was set in a pass between hills where only grazing cattle showed evidences of life. Never had she seen a lonelier location for a home.

Dave Daw drew the sorrels in before the house. "Well?" he challenged her.

"You could plant a lawn in front—"

"Yard grass takes water," Daw said shortly. "Pitcher pump in the kitchen and that's all."

"Isn't there water in the creek?" Patricia said.

He quickly unloaded suitcases and store purchases.

Young Billy snorted, "Yard grass," and chuckled to himself, giving her the corner of his scornful glance. How to get along with this young heathen was a problem she put to the back of her sorrowing mind.

"Drive the team out and unhitch, Billy," Daw said.

"My goodness," Patricia said, "can a seven-year-old do such things?"

"Watch him," Daw boasted, and young Billy, in a direct imitation of the man, sent the sorrels with no nonsense toward the barn.

DAVE DAW carried her suitcases inside and her heart sank still further. The big peeled-log room hadn't been cleaned in ages. The stone fireplace was messy. Cobwebby beams crossed the ceiling. Never in Philadelphia had she seen such a room. Two doors opened off the far side.

"You can have Billy's room," her employer said. "Billy can bunk with me."

"You mean—you sleep in the house, too?"

He found nothing at all unusual in the situation.

She sagged against the edge of a white-painted iron bed. She wondered how anyone, a woman most of all, could live in this remote and dirty house.

Daw called her to the kitchen. It was off the end of the big room, a sizable unfinished shed room with a plank table and a formidable looking range stove that appeared never to have been cleaned. Assorted dirty dishes were stacked in a flat wooden trough that served as a sink by the pitcher pump.

"Fine water," Dave Daw said. "Plenty of pitch kindling and wood outside the back door. Stove heats good. Billy and I sure are going to like someone else's cooking. We've fed on flapjacks and beans and bacon so long we've forgotten there's anything else. Don't ever serve us beans and bacon—not ever." He went out the back door to his man chores.

Miss Patricia Norton, governess, recently of Philadelphia, plumped down in a chair and leaned her head over on the dirty table and cried. . . .

Billy was asleep when Daw appeared in the kitchen. "This is what you've got to know," he said. "When I'm away you'll have to be on guard against Paul Overstreet."

"The man you beat in town?" she said coolly.

"The man I'll beat anywhere, any time, if he tries to get Billy. Overstreet is Billy's uncle, brother of Billy's mother. But when Lottie died she gave Billy into my hands. She knew her brother."

"He seemed quite nice," Patricia said.

"Overstreet would be nice or treacherous or anything else to get Billy. Billy is heir to ten thousand acres of the best grass and timber hereabouts. My brother and Lottie worked years paying for it, and last winter they died. Pneumonia. I wouldn't give a nickel for Billy's future if Overstreet got possession of that land."

She simply could not keep the edge from her voice. "As it is, you control Billy's land."

"I've got my own grass," he said shortly. "My cattle wouldn't dent Billy's grass. I lease it out and bank the money for him. I've applied for guardianship. Naturally Overstreet is bucking me. All he needs is Billy to swing over, and the authorities would side with him. You watch out for Overstreet till this thing is settled."

She tried to be concerned, but dirt and grime were more menacing. She collapsed into bed.

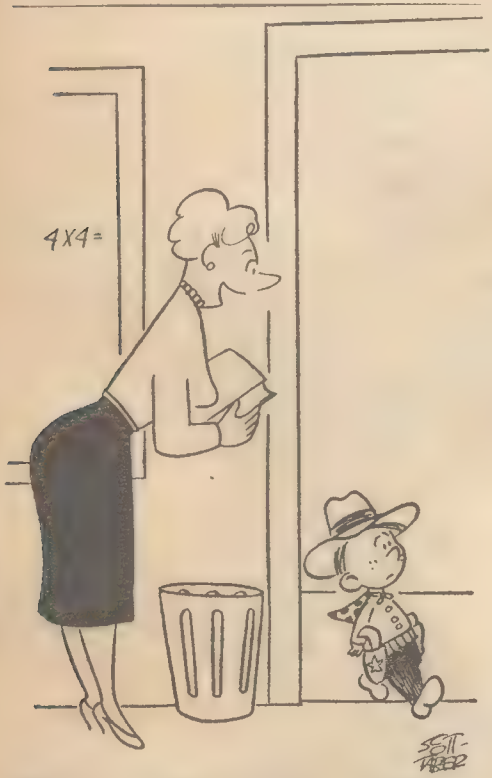
THE NEXT three days were spent in almost continuous scouring, scraping, rinsing, waxing. The kitchen was stubborn but the big log room responded. Dave Daw actually seemed to resent her efforts. He looked about with no comment.

What would he know of gentility? He seemed clean enough in person, but his general smell, like the house, was of cattle and horses. She took a bleak pleasure in erasing the odor from her own orbit. She retired each evening, aching and weary, to cry in solitude.

Only the stiffest resolution kept her from quitting and having Dave Daw take her to town. She meant to see this job through.

Young Billy she saw only at mealtimes. He stared malevolently across-table at her, but he put away huge portions of the food she cooked, as did his uncle.

The third evening Dave Daw said, "Riding tomorrow. Billy will stay here with you."




***"Welcome back to P.S. 99, Tommy . . . and will you please check your guns in the principal's office?"***

Billy's protest was a fearsome thing. He stomped about the table. "I won't stay with her."

"Sit down," Dave Daw said. "You'll stay or I'll tan you."

It was time for diplomacy. Patricia said, "You should be studying, Billy. I found some schoolbooks under the bed."

Daw looked at Billy. "So that's what happened to the schoolbooks. They just disappeared."

"I hate schooling. I hate Miss Norton," Billy cried.

She had ample proof of this next day. Billy drew his impression of her upon his slate, complete with stubby whiskers and cross eyes. At lunch she discovered a large, recently-squashed spider in her milk.

Outwardly calm, the incidents nevertheless fired her to the point of achieving an ambition. She rolled up her sleeves, disrobed a screaming little cowhand and scoured him in a tub of hot water.

"I never skinned off before a woman in years," Billy sobbed.

Cleanliness was magical. She discovered that Billy brushed and combed and in fresh cloth was a very good-looking little boy. "My goodness," she said.

"Dave and I wash in the crick," Billy said, past his tears. "He—he'll think think I'm a sissy."

He had a sprinkling of freckles on his nose, gray eyes like his uncle's and lashes longer than her own. "Didn't your mother ever bathe you, Billy?" she asked softly.

"Don't remember. She died. So did my pa. Dave didn't die. He's tough."

Patricia repressed the urge to kiss the boy's smooth cheek.

That afternoon, as Billy fished along the creek, she strolled outside, mentally marking off the area before the house which should be in green grass, clipped short. She heard a horseman on the road from town, and in a few moments later she felt quite flustered.

PAUL OVERSTREET, large and handsome, well-dressed in his flecked gray suit, drew in his satiny white horse and removed his hat. "Miss Norton, I'd hoped to find you here."

There was little subterfuge about this man. He smiled warmly and she was glad for her fresh appearance.

"Are you sure—that is, are you welcome here?" she asked.

"That's what I wanted to find out, first hand."

She understood him plainly, though she said, "Mr. Daw isn't home."

"I know that." He laughed. "Dave and

I will iron out our differences. In the meantime, if I came by some day with my rig, would you go driving with me?"

She said at once, "Oh, I couldn't. I have to look after Billy."

"But some day when he goes along with Dave?"

"I don't know," she said and felt as flustered as a schoolgirl. "I'm very busy, but I might."

"Fine, fine," he said, smiling. He tipped his hat and reined the big white horse around and went galloping down the road, the way he had come.

She felt a warmth throughout. Dave Daw didn't know her from a post, but when Paul Overstreet looked, a girl felt smooth, important, self-satisfied. She couldn't believe he was so bad.

She and Billy ate alone that evening. She kept watching out the window.

"Sometimes," Billy said, "we stay out on the range for two days. "We got a cabin way out. Coyotes come and howl there, worse'n here." He gave her a close look. "You ever hear the coyotes howl?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I think I have."

"Creeps the skin on your back."

"Yes," she said definitely. "I've heard them." She found it unnecessary to mention that she heard them almost every night, even with the covers pulled over her head.

"Good thing we got a door," Billy said. "They might come right in and eat us."

"Oh, stop it. That's very silly." But she waited in some anxiety for Dave Daw to come home. At bedtime she was still waiting.

"Billy," she said in sudden yearning, "didn't your mother kiss you good night?"

"No. It was a long time ago. I don't remember."

"Last winter? You can't remember that long? Of course you can. I'll bet she tucked you in and kissed you on the cheek."

Billy looked far away from her. "Sissy stuff."

"I'm going to kiss you good night, Billy."

She expected an outburst, but his small body remained rigid, suffering her kiss. His cheek was smooth, babyish.

He turned at his bedroom door. "Bet them coyotes howl loud tonight. They don't bother me, but you better cover your head up."

She went to bed smiling, feeling that this day she had made progress at her job.

SHE AWOKE to an odd scrabbling in her bedroom—the sound of feet, animal feet, running across the board floor. And she heard a long-drawn, quavering sound somewhere in the house, very close. Something touched her bed, scrabbled, and ran right over the top of her.

"Dave!" she screamed. "Billy!"

"Coyotes!" Billy shouted from his bedroom. "They got in the house."

Fresh terror paralyzed her throat but not her legs. She leaped from bed, flung open the door and ran into the big room. She quickly lit a lamp, just in time to see a horrid creature with beady eyes and a long hairless tail whisk from her bedroom. She nearly jarred the lamp over, but it was not a coyote at all. How in the world could a packrat get into her room. Unless—

From the other bedroom she heard convulsions of stifled laughter.

She was chasing the rat with a broom when Dave Daw walked in the open door. She dropped the broom, shrieked, ran into her bedroom and robed herself. While Daw scooted the rat outside she told him the story, quite calmly, she thought.

"Now, Miss Morton," he said, "boys are full of life. You've got to expect it."

"Mr. Daw," she said with great dignity, "you don't need a governess for Billy—you need a keeper."

Her first suitcase was nearly packed when her spirit returned. She stared at her things, then began unpacking. Most quietly she devised her revenge. . . .

Dave Daw and his horrible young nephew slipped through the kitchen door next evening precisely on the stroke of six. If her heart had not been hardened she would have smiled, the way they tiptoed.

"I have eaten," she announced. "Supper is on the table. I am going to read by the fireplace."

"Sure, Miss Norton," Daw quickly agreed. Young Billy's sigh of relief was audible.

She heard them getting set, happy to be free of her, jocular in each other's company. Then young Billy's squall resounded through the cabin.

"Sweet hell—beans and bacon, Dave!"

The utter silence throughout the meal made her revenge complete.

Billy had broken the news of Paul Overstreet's visit. Dave Daw waited till Billy was abed, then exploded.

Patricia waited till he was finished with pacing the floor. "Mr. Overstreet came to see me, not Billy," she said quietly.

"So help me, I'll run him off the place."

"With your fists, no doubt," she said, not so quietly.

He chose to ignore the thrust. "You think I was out on the range? I was in town, trying to push this guardianship thing through. You give me added weight—a governess for Billy. Overstreet was just plain snooping. He's worried."

"I think Mr. Overstreet was quite nice," she said. She gave no heed at all when Dave Daw stomped out of her presence.

BEFORE Dave rode away the following morning he told Billy in sharp tones, "I'll expect a good report on you, young man." But Patricia couldn't help feeling the threat of beans and bacon was greater to Billy. Though the lessons progressed remarkably well, she got no pleasure from it.

She retired at bedtime in a sort of dour triumph, but triumph has its limitations. She propped a chair under the door latch.

Some time later when she heard sounds in the big room she smiled, remembering that chair. Then a sudden noise, a sort of cry, awakened her fully.

Though positive it was a trick, she nevertheless arose and put her ear to the wall. A man's urgent voice commanded, "Damn it, Huston, get him out. You'll wake the woman."

It was Paul Overstreet's voice.

Her first impulse was to run into the other room, scream for Dave, scream for help. Then caution held her. She stayed frozen to silence while stealthy footsteps retreated, to be echoed very soon by hoofbeats on the road.

Even then she couldn't think straight. She dressed and ran to the barn and saddled with clumsy hands one of the more tolerant horses of the ranch. And still she was only going through motions. She didn't know what to do. She only knew Dave would blame her.

Dave was the one she must reach, and he might be out on the range, he might be in town, he might be anywhere. In the meantime, little Billy was held by Paul Overstreet, charming Mr. Overstreet, who fluttered silly female hearts and was as black as Dave had painted him.

A note scrawled for Dave's guidance seemed the next step, then she rummaged about the bedroom Billy had occupied. One sock, dropped in the kidnaper's haste, lay on the floor. She sought the remembered gun Billy had carried at the train and when she found it, her way was clear.

At the Overstreet canyon down the road she turned, jouncing slowly, painfully through a darkened land made hideous by scuttling roadside creatures. She reached the Overstreet house, a fine rambling place, with no more disaster than a violently thudding heart. Exercising her best judgment, she left her horse some distance away and crept into the yard and up on the long porch to the only light.

A rather harassed Paul Overstreet was saying, "Now, kid, we've fooled around long enough. All you got to do is tell the judge, or whoever asks, that you want to live here. You'll have that pinto and your own room and plenty of money to spend in town. What do you say?"

"You go to hell, you damn varmint," was Billy's reply.

Patricia blushed—and wanted to shout approval. She heard the sound of a slap, and that gave her the courage she required. She pushed open the door, Billy's gun extended firmly in front of her.

"Don't you dare move," she commanded.

Paul Overstreet and his man Huston stood very still.

"I'm a very poor shot," she said, "so take care. Come on, Billy."

"You bet," Billy cried, and got up.

"Why, hell," Paul Overstreet said, "that gun's got no hammer." Then he lunged.

Stars exploded in her face. It wasn't a black eye she minded as much as having failed Dave and Billy so miserably.

She swung the pistol and heard Overstreet cry out, and she was chopping it in short vicious arcs, manners most unbecoming to a Philadelphia governess, when she heard the drumming of hoofs over the drumming in her head. She kept swinging blindly till she heard Dave Daw at her side. Then she left matters up to him. . . .

"I want you to understand," she said as they rode homeward, "that I still don't approve of fighting."

"I understand," Dave said. "That's exactly why I didn't beat up Overstreet any more. Figured you'd done him enough damage with that six-shooter."

"I wouldn't want anyone to know of it," she said primly.

"Nonsense, we'll tell everybody. Tomorrow, we'll drive into town. Judge Baker was in doubt about a city girl. He won't have any doubts now. Nor have I."

"Gosh," Billy said in awestruck tones, "a shiner. A real shiner!"

It was, in a manner of speaking, a recognition of special merit. She smiled down at Billy who had chosen to ride home in front with her. Then she smiled at Dave.

Beyond a few aches and pains she felt wonderful. Things were looking up. She could hardly wait to get home to see the shiner herself.

They rode onward through the night.

---

## A CASE OF CAPITAL CRIME

**IT WAS D. C. BULTON'S inordinate pride in his skill as a lawyer that got a murderer pardoned, and at the same time helped make Sacramento the capital of California, rather than Columbia.**

**This was all taking place in the early 1850s, when there was great dispute as to where the capital would be located.**

**Then in 1854, someone in Columbia started to circulate a petition to the legislature to make their city the capital. The idea took hold, with thousands of miners signing the document.**

**Some of this worthy civic excitement was overshadowed when Peter Nicholas, a Russian, was hauled in for the knife murder of Captain John Parrot, and trial promptly set. Nicholas realized he was in a bad spot and hired D. C. Bulton, a lawyer who had never lost a murder case.**

**Bulton accepted and in typical fashion put in a brilliant plea for Nicholas. But the jury brought in a verdict of guilty, and Nicholas was immediately sentenced to be hung.**

**Bulton worried over the loss of his case, and was in a bank at Columbia a few days after the trial, when he overheard some men talking.**

**"Great, great," the men told Bulton. "Look at this." And Bulton's eyes widened as they unrolled the scroll bearing signatures of the ten thousand miners. "That should be enough to impress any politician when he votes for the capital."**

**Then he was told the miners were keeping the petition safely away each night in the big vault in the bank. "We're taking no chances that Sacramento crowd gets ahold of these names."**

**It was only a day or so after this, the bank's vault door was found hanging open. Curiously, only the scroll with the names of the miners was missing.**

**Without evidence of their petition or time to collect another, the legislature quickly picked Sacramento for the capital site.**

**With all of this bustle, no one even noticed when the Governor of California issued an executive order to pardon Peter Nicholas, convicted murderer from Columbia.**

**Bulton wasn't asked, and he certainly didn't offer the information that among the papers submitted to the Governor was a petition bearing the names of 10,000 miners, now altered to request the pardon of Peter Nicholas.**

***——Robert Carter***

# OUT OF THE CHUTES

SOMETIMES you can't help but wonder whether the old-timers weren't made of sterner stuff than folks are nowadays, when you read about the '49ers or the early Texas Rangers, or even about rodeo riders who made their names by risking their lives before there were any rules to protect life and limb in the arena.

Take Lee Roy Caldwell, for instance. Unless your memory stretches back nearly forty years, you've probably never heard of him, but he was one of the greatest rodeo riders of all time. Maybe you've never heard of a horse named Long Tom, either, but rodeo fans in 1915 knew him as the toughest bronc alive.

Lee Caldwell died a couple of months ago, but the ride he made aboard Long Tom will be remembered as long as there are folks who talk rodeo. It was at the Pendleton Round-Up on a dusty day in September that the two met and put on a desperate show that the fans in the bleachers never forgot.

Long Tom twisted and leaped so viciously that Lee's breastbone was broken in the first couple of seconds. Spectators scarcely saw him wince, as he went right on raking shoulders and flanks, almost seeming to anticipate every trick the bronc tried.

Rides didn't end automatically after ten seconds in those days—either the contestant or the horse had to give up. Finally Long Tom knew he was beaten. He gave up bucking and broke into a relatively smooth gallop. The judge's pistol was fired, signifying that the battle was over. Then at last Lee dismounted, and that was a show in itself. He could leap ten or fifteen feet sideways out of the saddle—not for the spectators' benefit, but to land well clear of a bronc bent on revenge.

Even that spectacular performance wasn't enough to win the Round-Up championship for Lee. Fractured breastbone and all, he made one more ride on a bronc named Spitfire, a good ride but an anti-climax after his mastery of Long Tom.

In those days the Round-Up winner was the recognized World's Champion, but Lee made his title undebatable by also winning the Canadian Championship at Moosejaw, Sask., that same year of 1915.

THE year before Lee had been barely beaten out of the coveted Police Gazette belt which went to the Round-Up champ Red Parker. Some of the other rodeo stars contesting then were movie star Hoot Gibson, Indian top-hand Jackson Sundown, famous stuntman Yakima Canutt. There was Hugo Strickland, who started competing in 1910, and didn't wind up his rodeo career until 1932. And there was Milt Hinkle, bulldogger and bronc-rider from 1905 to 1928.

It was not unusual when rodeo was a young Western sport for rodeo careers to last fifteen or twenty years. A top-hand might enter only one or two professional shows in a season because he usually earned his living working on a ranch, and he just couldn't take the time to go gallivanting off to a show which might not even pay his travelling expenses.

You might think that cowboys today are more inclined to flashy clothes than they used to be, but it's not so. Modern top-hands mostly wear bright colors to please the spectators. Left to themselves, they'd sport nothing gaudier than blue shirts and jeans. Twenty-five years ago, though, the cowboys used to vie with each other in resplendence.

Lee Caldwell, for instance, according to a friend of his, wore not one necktie, but two. He'd tie a kerchief "bright red or yellow" around his neck backwards, and also wear a patterned four-in-hand in front. He favored polka dots on this one. His shirt was satin, of almost any color not repeated in the neckties. His favorite pair of chaps were white leather decorated with conchas, and with his first name appliqued in silver down the side. Since his name

LEE CALDWELL

was short, Lee could use big letters—each of them six inches long.

When World War I broke out, Lee joined the famous "Cowboy Company," Troop D of the 3rd Oregon Cavalry. Lee was the second to enlist in the outfit and was elected Captain of it. Even then cavalry was on the way out, so the unit was later switched to field artillery, and with Caldwell still Captain fought at Chateau Thierry, Belleau Wood and the Argonne.

Dozens of members of the company came into it practically direct from the Pendleton Round-Up arena, and they puzzled both their French allies and their German enemies by hollering "Let 'Er Buck," and "Powder River" as they fought. The outfit was twice cited by the French government (as well as by the U. S. government) for gallantry in action.

Lee never went back into rodeo after the war as an active contestant, though, of course, he never lost interest in the sport. He turned instead to training horses, and turned out to be as skillful at gentling a young colt as he'd been at spurring an old outlaw. He lived in Pendleton until a few years ago, when he moved to Stockton, Calif., where he died last April. He was 60 years old then, still handsome, bright-eyed, and still likely to get embarrassed when he heard himself called, "the greatest bronc-rider of his day."

While we're on the subject of yesterday's heroes, we'd like to bring up Col. Jack Hayes, whose biography has just been written by James Kimmins Greer, a professor at Texas' Hardon-Simmons University, and published by E. P. Dutton.

Col. Jack was the most successful Indian fighter in Texas history. He never lost a battle, though the forces he faced always outnumbered his own at least ten to one. Sometimes the odds were forty to one. Jack Hayes was a Captain in the Texas Rangers when he was 23, and helped make Texas a state, though he was a native Tennessean.

In those days if you joined the Rangers you had to be willing to put up with rattlesnakes or tarantulas in your blankets—if you had any blankets. Men rode wild broncs not to win points, but simply because an outlaw horse was a better mount than no horse at all. Superlative riding skill was taken for granted among the Indian fighters, plus the ability to handle a gun, a knife, a bout of fever or a batch of sour-dough.

In spite of the hardships, men flocked to join Col. Jack's regiment, and the valiant feats they accomplished, as told by Professor Greer, seem almost incredible today.

It's our guess, though, that people are just about as brave and unbeatable as they have to be, and probably it's just because we don't *have* to fight for every day's existence that make us think we couldn't.

*Adios,*

THE EDITORS

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# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

## by Professor MARCUS MARI

### THE HOROSCOPE OF A MAN OF VIRGO

ASTROLOGY often holds the clue to unfavorable as well as to admirable personality traits. Let's look, for instance, at the horoscope of a notorious Virgoan, Jesse Woodson James. Born on September 5, 1847, he developed the worst features of the Virgoan character—craftiness and cold-bloodedness.

Ideally, the Virgoan is a generous, easy-going individual with a calm and equable temperament. At the other extreme, he may be anxious for easy gains, and ruthless in achieving his aims. Jesse James was like this. He was able to carry out the bloodiest ventures with no visible signs of remorse.

Like many other Virgoans, he was quiet and cautious, keeping his head in a crisis. Taciturn, he seldom bragged or talked about himself. These ordinarily admirable traits in this case served as a shield for outlawry.

Had James not matured at the time of the bitter Kansas-Missouri border feud and the Civil War, it is possible that he might have lived the life of a peaceful, respected citizen.

As it was, his Virgoan characteristics—cleverness, coolness and imagination—found their outlet in a career of crime. This serves as a warning to the student of astrology: No matter how fine the qualities under a given sign may be, if the individual is not led by the influence and example of those around him into constructive channels, he may turn to an anti-social element to fulfill his destiny.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Steet, New York, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose thee cents instead of stamp.)

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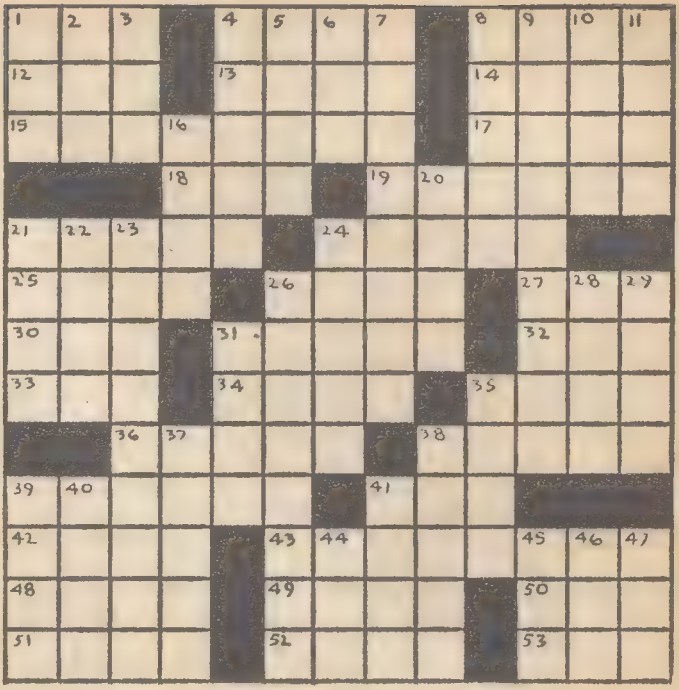
# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



*The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

## ACROSS

1 To tear
4 To drag
8 Lean-to
12 Top card
13 Too
14 To grant
15 Men who herd cattle
17 Fury
18 Possessive pronoun
19 Classified
21 Horse's easy gait
24 Cowboy garment
25 Human being
26 To coagulate
27 Male cat
30 An eternity
31 Signal light
32 Monkey
33 Noah's boat
34 To work for
35 Addition symbol
36 Cowboy's companion
38 Oklahoma city
39 Decorates
41 To make a mistake
42 Noisy
43 Unbranded calf
48 Otherwise
49 Any open surface
50 Fish eggs
51 Fortune teller
52 Bird's home
53 Hen fruit

## DOWN

1 College cheer
2 Frozen water
3 For each
4 Quickness
5 Charity
6 To employ
7 Texas breed of cattle
8 Fragment
9 Part of a bridle
10 Border
11 An act
16 Pickling herb
20 Charge per unit
21 At sea
22 To anchor a ship
23 Cowboys' sleeping quarters
24 Diminutive of Clara
26 Member of a class
28 Musical work
29 Western plateau
31 Flowerless plant
35 Contented cat's noise
37 Command
38 To show hospitality to
39 Malt beverages
40 To deal out sparingly
41 Pre-holiday times
44 Exist
45 Anger
46 Gear tooth
47 Small cask

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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*Solution to Puzzle in the Preceding Issue*

# Superstition Range

*By Parker Bonner*

THE STORY SO FAR: Alone with the badlands' most dangerous crew, MARY THORNE rides into the dread Superstition country to find a lost gold cache. Making a deal with the leader, ruthless BILL DRAKE, she gives him the map, but she alone knows the gold's exact location. Though she discovers Bill has killed her lawyer, WAKEMAN, she doesn't know that Wakeman suggested to Bill that she be murdered. In terror, Mary turns to Bill's brother ANDY, who tells her to pick a protector. She decides the only way she can survive after she's led them to the gold is with the whole crew behind her. It's not hard, for many are jealous of Bill, especially MONTE GORDON and the PECOS KID. They and a couple of their friends decide they'll take care of the Drakes when the time comes—and flip for Mary.

## PART TWO

THEIR new camp was surrounded by a rough, jutting plateau from which larger hills climbed in terraced steps toward the massive crests beyond. To their right, some ten or fifteen miles away, a mountain with a pronounced saddle pushed

its head up out of the jumbled debris of some forgotten volcanic action.

Bill Drake studied it. Then, pulling the map from his sweat-damp shirt, he spread it on the ground, leaning forward over it. Finally he refolded it and thrust it back into its resting place.

Mary Thorne had been standing not far away, watching the play of changing expression on his face, and she stepped in now, saying in an excited voice, "Are we on the right trail?"

Drake shrugged expressively. "Who knows? This country changes with every cloudburst. Half the time a man can't backtrack himself. I once knew a miner who left his claim and went fifteen miles for supplies. When he returned he found his canyon buried under a hundred feet of loose rock and mud. If that's happened to your wagon train, we'll never find it."

He turned away, and the girl stared after him, irritated and dissatisfied. For an instant she was tempted to follow him, but, changing her mind, she turned back to the wagon and let the old cook fill her plate. This she carried to a small sandy patch at the right of the camp where a cluster of waist-high rocks offered a little privacy. She settled herself, her position partially obscured from the camp below, and proceeded to eat unhurriedly.

After she had finished, she set the plate aside and leaned back, pulling her hat down to shade her eyes. She was not asleep, but through her tired body ran waves of weariness, making her a little light-headed.

She lay there, almost too exhausted to move, until finally she sensed that she was no longer alone, and, opening her eyes slowly, she stared up to find the Pecos Kid squatted on the rocks not six feet away, watching her.

His pale eyes were steady and unblinking, and the eyelashes were so light as to be almost invisible. This gave a certain reptilian quality to his stare, and the girl shivered unconsciously.

She closed her eyes, hoping that he would go away, but the feeling of his presence lingered. Opening her eyes again, she saw that Pecos Kid had not altered his position. His long, narrow, sallow face had an intent look, as if he were staring at something in the far distance. There was a hypnotic quality about his stare, and Mary Thorne had to rouse herself consciously to break it.

She straightened, saying in half anger, "You want something?"

"You," said the Kid, and his thin lips parted in the coldest smile she had ever seen.

She caught her breath, the nagging fear struggling with her rising anger, but the anger won. "Get away from here. You're crazy."

"I've been talking to Gordon," he said. "Gordon told me you want to make a deal. Gordon says you're afraid of Drake."

HIS WORDS caught her off balance. She was torn by her desire to make friends with the crew and her deep-felt aversion to this grinning man whose face looked like a death's head as he squatted there, leering at her.

She forced down her feeling of repugnance and managed to say in an evener tone, "Whatever Mr. Gordon has told you is probably correct, but it isn't safe for you to be seen talking to me."

"Why?"

She was exasperated. "That should be pretty obvious to anyone who isn't a fool. If Bill Drake sees you we'll both be in trouble."

"The hell with Bill Drake."

For the year and a half since he'd joined the crew, the Pecos Kid had resented Bill Drake. The Kid, like most of his kind, was an egomaniac. He was certain that he was the most deadly man on the frontier, that his hand could pull one of the heavy guns faster than anyone in the Territory. He resented orders of any kind, and many a night, lying stretched in his blanket on the hard ground, he had planned for the day when he and Drake would have their showdown.

But with all this, there was a streak of hard caution in the Kid, a caution born of his early childhood. It was this caution which had enabled him to survive as long

as he had, and it was this caution which had kept him a restive, but outwardly amenable follower of Drake's leadership.

He had bided his time, studying the men around Drake, waiting his chance. Long before, he had measured Monte Gordon, spotting the man's weaknesses, planning that, when the right time came, he could use Gordon, even as Gordon was hoping to use him.

He had not been deceived by Gordon's words of the preceding night. He knew exactly what Gordon hoped. Gordon hoped to pit him against Drake, and when the Kid had killed the outlaw chief, Gordon expected to step forward and take command.

The Kid had no aversion to killing Drake, but once that killing was an accomplished fact, he meant to take over the leadership himself.

This, then, had been his dream of long standing, and unconsciously Mary Thorne, by her presence, had done something to the Pecos Kid. He had hated and mistrusted women for a long time and he mistrusted this girl, but in the quiet minutes while he had watched her, thinking that she slept, something had stirred in his narrow breast.

He wanted her. He meant to have her. And if this want meant a showdown with Bill Drake, he was more than ready.

He rose. Even as he spoke he was stepping toward her. His grin was supposed to be reassuring, but it had the opposite effect on the girl. She tried to come to her feet, but one of the Kid's long arms snaked out and his fingers wrapped about her wrist.

She tried to draw her gun with her free hand. He laughed down at her, knocking it aside easily, with a contempt which told her that he considered it not much more than a toy.

She hit him in the face then, not with her open hand, but with her fist, striking like a boy, her small knuckles hard and sharp, bruising his curved lips.

He was dragging her toward him, crushing her against him, swearing sharply under his breath. "You're like all women." He was savage now. "You can't be trusted. You can't keep a bargain." Then he buried his mouth against hers as she opened it to scream.

ANDY DRAKE came down off the pile of rock. In one swinging leap he landed just behind the Pecos Kid, his left hand shooting out to grasp the Kid's bony shoulder. He jerked the Kid away from the girl so violently that she was pulled forward to her knees. Then Andy swung his fist directly into the Kid's narrow face.

The Kid went backwards, stumbling to try to regain his balance, his high heel catching on a rock fragment and throwing him heavily. He lay on his back, the wind partly knocked out of him, glaring up at Andy, trying to claw with both hands at his holstered guns.

Andy dove for him, landing on top of the thin chest, driving the air from the slight body with his very bulk. He reached down, caught the man's right wrist and dragged the clawing fingers clear of the gun, twisting the arm upward and outward until the elbow threatened to spring from its socket.

The Kid groaned, but he was no man to quit. He still struggled to free himself, to wrench clear of Andy's superior strength.

Andy panted, "Stop it or I'll break your arm."

"Break it, damn you!" The Kid tried again to heave himself free.

Andy gave the arm a final twist. Beads of sweat jumped out on the Kid's forehead from the pain. His eyes closed. His face was dead white under the tan, and all the strength seemed to flow out of him.

In that instant Andy let go the arm, reached down and pulled free one of the Kid's guns. He rose then, the gun pointed at its owner, and the Kid managed to come up after him, still spitting like a rattlesnake. Andy swung up the heavy gun and crashed the long barrel down across the man's head.

The Pecos Kid's arms went wide. He dropped to his knees, and Andy hit him again, striking savagely. This time the Kid went forward onto his face.

Slowly Andy stepped back, still holding the Kid's gun balanced in his right hand. He used his left shirt sleeve to wipe the

sweat out of his eyes and stood for a moment, breathing heavily, staring down at the prostrate gunman.

Below them the camp was in turmoil, men charging up the slight slope. He looked at them, then turned and glanced down at the girl.

It had happened so rapidly that she was still on her knees. She scrambled up hurriedly as he said, "Hurt, Bantam?"

She shook her head, and his mouth twisted. "What did you make up to that dog for?" He used the toe of his scuffed boot to stir the senseless man.

A denial leaped to her lips, but she crowded it down unuttered, saying half angrily, "You're the one who told me to pick a strong man to protect me."

The look Andy gave her had a trace of scorn. "I don't admire your taste, Bantam."

Her temper, on edge from her recent terror, flared at him. "Is there a choice between murderers?"

He looked at her for a moment longer, then, turning his back, he faced the crew as they boiled up through the rocks, led by Bill Drake.

DRAKE stopped and stared down at the unconscious Kid, then at his brother and finally at the girl. Afterwards he turned and looked at the other members of the crew, saying tonelessly, "Any of you want to pick up this fight?"

He faced them all, but his attention seemed to center on Monte Gordon.

Gordon shifted from one foot to the other, refusing to meet Bill's eyes. Drake looked at him coldly, his mouth twisting in a small sardonic smile. Then he spoke to the assembled men. "Pick up this piece of carrion and cart him back to the fire."

Tex Hart and Burns stooped, grasping the Kid under the arms. Monte Gordon took his legs. Between them they carried him down the slope, the rest of the crew following, uncertain.

Bill watched until they reached the canyon floor. Then he turned back to face Andy, still pointedly ignoring the girl.

"You should have killed him when you had the chance. Never use your hands on a man like Pecos. They don't understand it. He'll put a bullet in your back the first opportunity that comes along. Haven't you got any sense?"

Andy was sullen. "He was mauling Bantam."

"Who?"

Andy reddened. "That's what I call her," he said lamely, indicating the silent girl.

Bill Drake turned to look at her. He said in a slow, deliberate voice, "I wish that none of us had ever seen you, ma'am."

Mary Thorne returned his stare defiantly. In her anger she had lost most of her fear of this big man. "What makes you say that?"

"Because," he told her slowly, "you're going to raise hell. A good-looking female is more dangerous than a can of powder, and as deadly. I watched you. You've been playing up to the men. You little fool! Don't you know better than to do a thing like that? Some of these men haven't been in town for six months. Some of them have almost forgotten what a woman looks like."

Her flush was a deep red. "You've got no right to talk to me like that."

"Haven't I?" he said. "If I haven't the right, I'm making it my right. This is my crew. We're in the middle of hostile Indian country. We haven't a friend within fifty miles. If we get to fighting among ourselves, we're dead. If I see you so much as smile at one of the crew again I'll tie you up. Now get some sleep. We're riding out before dark."

He turned and looked at his brother. "Come on. I want to talk to you."

Andy glanced toward the girl, but she refused to meet his eyes. He turned and followed Bill down the slope toward the camp. Bill halted before he reached the fire and turned slowly.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you." He was still angry. "Look there." He turned and pointed toward a high range of distant hills. "See that?"

Andy looked. Three columns of smoke were rising straight into the quiet, hot air.

"Indians?"

Bill nodded. "If you'd been paying more

attention to what you were doing and less to that girl, you'd have seen them before this. They've been watching us since yesterday. There's damn little goes on in these hills that they don't know about."

"White River?"

Bill shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe some of Victor's men. Maybe some broncos, out stealing horses. It doesn't matter. As long as we stay together we're all right. If we should split up, we'd all be dead. Those Indians have some old scores to settle with my men. For a dollar I'd turn around and head south. What good is gold if you lose your hair?"

Andy started to answer, but Bill did not wait. He turned on his heel, moving down into the camp. After a minute, Andy followed.

IT WAS dusk when they rode northward. Bill Drake was purposely crossing the broken country at night, saving the strength of both his horses and his men.

To the eastward the Dragoons faded as they bore away to miss Fort Grant and come to the Gila westward of its junction with the San Pedro. To the northward the mountains turned cindery, losing their thin vegetation in a welter of wasted heat-scorched rock.

Near midnight they struck water and Bill Drake gave the reluctant order to step down. At first he had been in no hurry to proceed, but now he seemed consumed with the desire to forge forward as rapidly as possible. The crew was glum and silent as they chewed grudgingly on the jerked meat and cold beans.

Afterwards they stretched flat against the rocky ground, ignoring the gathering chill, too exhausted to think or care. No one save the old cook had wasted a word on Mary Thorne since the ride had begun. She felt the weight of their glances, of their sullenness, as if they collectively blamed her for their being in this place.

She stayed close to the wagon, for she too had seen the smoke signals which had drawn their warning fence along the afternoon sky. Not until darkness covered the rising pillars were they lost to sight, but instead of bringing relief, the covering darkness had brought an added feeling of danger.

Across the fire Andy Drake also sat by himself, slightly withdrawn from the rest of the crew. He too felt their dislike. He knew that to them he was an outsider and that although few of them actually liked the Pecos Kid, they would take the Kid's side in any quarrel between them.

Bill Drake sensed this also. He stood leaning against the tail gate of the wagon, talking to the cook, but watching every movement in the camp.

Suddenly he raised his voice. "Kid."

The Pecos Kid had been sitting beside the fire, between Monte Gordon and Tex Hart. He could not have failed to hear Bill Drake's call, but he gave no sign. His head was forward as he stared at the rough ground between his booted feet.

The conversation around the fire had been slow, but now it died entirely, and the crew watched Bill without appearing to.

Bill Drake stood for a moment as if he had been turned to stone, then he moved slowly forward, not stopping until he stood directly over the Pecos Kid.

"Get up."

The Kid did not stir. He might have become stone deaf for all the sign he gave.

Bill Drake looked around. He caught Monte's eyes upon him, malice filled and mocking. He saw Tex Hart shift slightly in order to free the gun at his hip, and he ignored them.

He reached down suddenly and, catching the Pecos Kid by the collar of his coat, hoisted him to his feet, saying sharply as he did so, "I told you to get up."

With an oath the Pecos Kid tried to pull himself free. At the same time he reached for one of his guns.

Bill Drake did not release him. Instead he lifted the Kid off the ground and shook him as a terrier might have shaken a mouse.

THE KID managed to get one gun half free, but Drake had twisted him around so that it was impossible for the Kid to put a bullet into the older man.

Drake held him easily, big muscle bulg-

ing in his right arm as he extended it, still supporting the struggling Kid.

"Behave, or I'll break your neck." His big hand shot out, to wrench the Kid's gun from his grasp and drop it in the dust. Then he reached around the slim waist, hugging the Kid back against him, and got the second gun. Afterwards he dropped him.

The Pecos Kid lit on his feet like a balanced cougar, and he turned, spitting like a cat as rage filled him. His thin face was still marked by his fight with Andy that afternoon, and his light eyes fairly smoked.

"Let me have a gun."

Bill Drake looked at him, and there was contempt in his eyes.

"I'd like to kill you." He was speaking slowly. "I'd be doing a favor to the whole Territory if I put a bullet in your wishbone."

"Go ahead." The Kid looked down at the guns lying at his feet in the flinty dust. "Go ahead, kill me."

He dropped, even as he spoke, falling purposely on his left elbow, his right hand snaking out for one of the guns.

He touched it, but he never got it fully into his grasp, for Bill Drake, making no attempt to draw his own weapon, stepped forward, bringing his heel down sharply on the back of the Kid's hand.

The Kid cried out in sharp anguish as the bones fractured under the heel. Bill Drake gave an added twist, then stepped back, leaving the Kid to writhe on the ground. He stood there for a moment in utter silence, then he said harshly, "Get up."

The Kid did not obey and Bill caught him by the collar. "Get up when I tell you to or I'll break the other hand." He jerked the Kid erect, leaving him to stand swaying, staring down stupidly at the shattered hand.

"Maybe you won't be so quick to pull a gun now."

He turned away, looking directly into Monte Gordon's eyes. There was no mockery in Gordon's eyes now, only a deep-seated, cringing fear. He stared back at Drake for a moment, then let his eyes fall away.

Drake shrugged. "Take care of him," he said, and walked on over to his brother's side.

Gordon straightened and grasped the Kid's arm. "Someone give me a hand." Tex Hart came to help him and together they led the shaken man down to the spring.

Surprisingly, Mary Thorne had come to her feet. She walked over to Drake and said in a voice which carried clearly to all of the listening men,

"You're nothing but a brute." She turned then and followed Gordon and Hart, coming up to them as they lowered the Kid to a sitting position beside the spring.

"Here, let me help." She bent down beside the injured man, taking the bruised hand in both her own, washing it gently, then feeling the jagged bones.

"We'll have to try and set it. Has anyone got some cloth?"

The cook had, in his wagon. He brought it, and one of the men began trying to whittle out some splints.

Andy watched the operations without moving, saying to his brother in an under tone, "You've made no extra friends tonight."

"No," said Bill. "We've both made mistakes, you for not killing him this afternoon, me for not breaking his other hand tonight. He'll come at one or both of us yet."

"And he'll have men behind him."

Bill nodded again. "That's a woman for you. You jump in and protect her from him this afternoon. This evening she is busy playing nursemaid merely because he's hurt. The Kid hasn't changed because he has some broken bones. Nothing will ever change him. He's as trustworthy as a rattlesnake and just as poisonous. Well, to hell with her, and with him."

He went back, raising his voice as he moved into the fire. "All right, time to roll."

MARY THORNE had just finished tying the improvised splints in place. The Kid had not uttered a sound all the time her strong fingers had worked at the fractured hand, but his face

looked very white and there was a line of perspiration across his narrow forehead.

She stood up, knocking the dust from her knees, and marched over to face the elder Drake. "That man is in no condition to ride."

"What do you want me to do, leave him here? If I did the Indians would save me trouble by killing him."

She bit her lip. "At least you might let him ride in the chuckwagon."

"Talk to the cook." Bill Drake sounded indifferent as he turned away. "The wagon belongs to him."

She moved back to where the cook was loading his gear. "You heard what Bill said."

The cook was torn between his growing respect for the girl and his dislike of having his wagon arrangements disturbed. He had no liking for the Pecos Kid, and he pretended none.

"I'll let him ride if you say so," his voice was a grumble, "but tell him to keep his feet out of the food box."

Tex Hart and Monte Gordon helped the Pecos Kid into the wagon, then turned and mounted their own horses. The crew moved out, the girl riding close to the side of the swaying wagon, Monte Gordon and Hart directly behind her.

Gordon spoke to his friend in an undertone which barely carried above the scuff of their horses' feet. "Did you see what she did when the Kid was hurt? She's smart."

Hart turned to look at him. "What are you driving at?"

"The girl. She stood up to Drake, and she called him a brute. It was the best thing that could have happened for us. Every man in the crew is blaming Drake for the fight. When the showdown comes, they'll all be lined up with us."

At the head of the column, Andy was saying almost the same thing. "I don't like the way the crew acted when you roughed the Kid."

Bill's eyes were on the distant mountains. "There hasn't been a day since we first started riding that one or more of them wouldn't have jumped me if they dared."

"And it's probably my fault." Andy spoke without thinking. "I guess I put her up to it."

Bill turned his head then. "What are you talking about?"

Andy stopped. He still did not want to tell his brother that the girl had seen Wakeman's horse with the bloodstain on the saddle.

BILL WAITED, then he said with a short laugh, "No one put her up to making that play for Gordon or the Pecos Kid unless you think she did it to make you jealous."

Andy was genuinely surprised. "Why should she want to make me jealous?"

"Look," said Bill, "never ask me why a woman does anything. I stopped guessing about them a long time ago. And stop worrying about things you can't change. The chances are good that none of us will ever get out of these hills. If we are going to die, nothing else much matters."

"You don't believe that we're going to die?"

"Son," said Bill, "I've been expecting to die for seven years. A lot of people in this Territory think that I have plenty of sand. They don't realize that I just don't give a damn. Today, tomorrow, sometime a bullet with my name on it will be molded. What's the odds whether I get it tonight or five years from now?"

"I'm not ready to die yet," Andy told him. "I've got a lot to live for."

"What," said Bill, "a lot of hard riding and thirst and sweat and fleas? Oh, I know, when I was your age I felt the same way. The world was going to open up and be shiny and bright and gay."

Andy had never seen his brother in this mood before. "But there are a lot of things ahead of you," he argued. "What about the gold? We could go some place out of here and buy a ranch with our share. We could do a hundred things."

"Sure," said Bill, "a hundred things." He spurred ahead as if he no longer wanted to talk about it, and Andy did not follow. Instead he dropped back, reining his horse in at the girl's side.

She gave no sign that she was conscious

of his presence, and they rode thus for a couple of miles. Gordon and Tex Hart had fallen back when Andy arrived so that they could talk without being overheard.

"I suppose," Andy said at last, "that you're very proud of yourself."

Mary Thorne turned angrily. "I have no interest in your opinion."

"Haven't you?" said Andy. "That was a nice little piece of acting on your part, tying up the Kid's hand after he had been brutalized by Bill."

"That wasn't acting." Her tone was sharp. "Anyone would help a man when he's hurt."

"And why did he get hurt?" Andy sounded more bitter. "Why did I jump him this afternoon? It was to keep him from pawing you."

She flashed at him, "That doesn't excuse your brother for what he did tonight."

"You're a fool," he said. "I should have killed the Kid this afternoon. Since I didn't, the chances are that he would have shot me in the back the first chance he got. Bill knew that. Bill figures that I'm not good enough to face the Kid. He deliberately took on the fight tonight. He purposely transferred the Kid's hatred to himself."

She was silent and he went on. "A very nice neat little plan you have. I saw you talking to Gordon this afternoon, and I saw Gordon talking to the Kid. The Kid is no bargain, but he would never have visited you this afternoon unless something stirred him up. Bill knows it, and I know it. We both realize that you're trying to rile up the crew."

"I don't care what you know." She was as angry as he was. "You yourself told me to pick a man to protect me. Would you rather I'd picked someone else?"

He did not answer. He was caught between a feeling of loyalty for his brother and a rising feeling for this girl.

Damn her, he thought. She twists every word that I say. She always manages to put me squarely in the wrong. He lapsed into sullen silence, staring out across the broken waste through which they traveled.

They were riding through a small draw whose banks shelved away to be lost in the purple, velvety darkness which now softened the harsh land, masking the jutting rock dykes, hiding the tumbled, jumbled masses of boulders.

They were still too low for much timber, but the slopes were well blanketed with mescal bushes and clumps of mesquite. Catclaw bushes with their sharp, fishhook barbs pressed close on either side, catching at the passing riders and the lumbering wagon.

The night was quiet and peaceful and serene, nothing to alert the senses nor warn the riders, nothing until the arrow came out of the brush and cut Burns clear out of his saddle.

He dropped to the ground, then struggled to his feet, a cry of horror welling up out of his full throat as he tugged at the feathered end which showed in his shirt front like a decoration.

Monte Gordon had been riding beside him. Monte rose in his stirrups and fired toward the brush at the side of the trail, at the same time sending out his shout to warn the crew.

"Apaches! Apaches!"

THE CREW reacted like the trained fighters they were. There was not the panic which the Indians had hoped for. They wheeled, and Bill Drake's voice cut at them through the night. "Watch the horses. Watch the horses."

Bill Drake knew his Indians. He had been fighting them for seven years. He knew that this was no war party, no concerted attack. An Indian seldom fought at night, fearing that if he died in darkness his spirit would never find its way to the hunting ground.

This was more likely a horse stealing sortie, a few broncos trying to create enough confusion in the crew so that they could grab the spare horses and escape.

He drove his horse directly for the brush with Andy and Monte Gordon at his heels. The rest had circled back, protecting the wagon and the small horse herd.

They crashed through, and Andy saw a form, not much clearer than a shadow, rise in the path of his horse. He fired almost in

the Apache's face and saw the man go down.

There was heavy firing from the rear. The night was filled with sound. He heard his brother swear, off to the right, and then Bill's shout, calling them back for Bill well knew the danger to a lone man in the brush.

Andy swung his horse, riding back the way he had come, expecting to find the Indian's body where he had shot him down. But there was no body. The man apparently had not been hurt so seriously but that he had managed to drag himself away.

As the attack had begun, the cook had shouted to Mary Thorne to get down under the wagon. The cook had hauled a heavy rifle from the seat and was standing, staring at the brush, searching for something at which to shoot. But the shadows along the trail were deceptive. Firing came from the rear and they judged that the main Indian attempt had been made on the horse herd.

Mary Thorne had swung down from her horse and walked back to where Burns lay unmoving beside the trail. She knelt down and realized that the man was dead.

The cook had left the wagon seat to join her and together they stood for a full moment over the dead man. Then they turned and walked back to the wagon.

"That will be all." The cook sounded relieved. "Those red devils are a mile away already. I don't suppose they expected to run into so much trouble. They probably thought they could knock over a few of us, grab some horses and run."

The girl shivered, looking around at the shadows. "How can you be sure?"

"Can't," said the cook, "but no Injun likes fighting at night. If it were near dawn now I'd say that they might try another whack at us."

HE TURNED and, leaning his rifle against the tail-gate of the wagon, pulled out his short pipe and began to fill it as Bill Drake, followed by Andy and Monte Gordon, rode up to the wagon. The rest of the crew was drifting forward, leaving the horse guards with the restive animals.

Bill looked around. "How many hurt?"

"Burns is dead." The cook's tone expressed no grief.

Tex Hart spoke from beyond the wagon. "Youngman got an arrow in his shoulder and Field caught one in the leg. They're bringing them in."

Bill looked at the girl and there was an edge of mockery in his tone. "Chance for you to try some more of your nursing, ma'am."

He turned to Andy. "You and Gordon circle the camp and see what sign you can pick up. Don't get separated and don't go more than fifty yards from the trail."

They turned their horses against the rising grade, riding forward spaced a good ten yards apart, and lifted upward toward the rim of the draw until they came against the naked rock.

Careful not to rise above it so that their outline would show against the lighter sky, they edged forward, watchful, yet already relaxing. They sensed rather than knew that the Indians were gone, slipping away through the barrier of broken stones toward the higher ridges beyond.

They had traveled perhaps an eighth of a mile when a sudden, warning scream cut through the night, a woman's scream, wordless, yet carrying a quality which lifted the short hairs at the back of Andy's neck.

The scream was followed almost at once by a rifle shot, and with a muttered curse. Andy swung his horse downhill and drove toward the crew below.

He was only half conscious that Gordon was following, crashing along at the rear. He broke onto the trail above the wagon and had a moment's look at the whole crew, motionless, held thus by shock and surprise.

The cook had lighted a couple of lanterns in order to tend the wounded, and hung them from the side of the wagon. In their light Andy had the whole picture.

Mary Thorne standing to one side, frozen and motionless. The cook, half turned as if he had been headed for the horse herd when the action took place. Bill Drake, flat on the ground and motionless, and the Pecos Kid standing over him, gripping the cook's rifle tightly in his undamaged hand.

ANDY DID NOT stop to think. The motion which jabbed his spurs into his horse's flanks was entirely instinctive. The animal leaped forward, the crew members jumping to safety out of the way of his charge as Andy drove straight at the Kid.

The Kid heard him coming and swung around. He had the rifle cradled over his useless hand, his other on the trigger. He fired from the hip, the rifle stock held against his thigh, steadying it, and the fifty caliber slug struck Andy's horse directly in the mouth, tearing through into the animal's brain.

It fell as if it had been hit in the head with an ax, and Andy fell with it. He had been carrying his gun in his hand and as he hit on his shoulder and rolled, he lost it somewhere in the dust.

But he did not stop. He rolled over across his shoulder blades and came to his feet in lunge, a dozen feet separating him from the crouching Kid.

He jumped forward as the heavy gun roared again. The bullet tore the hat from Andy's head, sending it spinning in the dust but failing to touch his hair.

And the recoil of the rifle probably saved his life for the gun's heavy barrel kicked up and before the Kid could get it down, Andy was on him, tearing it from his grasp and hurling it into the brush at the side of the trail.

But the Pecos Kid was far from through. He had stolen a butcher knife from the cook's box and wore it thrust in his belt. He drew it now and came forward in a half crouch, his damaged hand held out straight before him, the knife grasped in his other hand.

Andy might have dodged him, but he charged straight ahead. He brushed aside the broken hand and made a grab for the knife wrist. The Kid evaded him and, twisting his foot, tripped Andy neatly.

Despite the disadvantage of the broken hand the Kid was confident. He was a trained barroom fighter, knowing all the tricks, and he had the knife against Andy's bare hands.

The Kid's teeth showed in a wolfish grin as the two men went down together. His lips opened and his teeth closed firmly on Andy's ear. He had Andy's right arm pinned between them and he swung at Andy's left side, the sharp blade tearing at the shirt and digging a groove along Andy's ribs.

But Andy's strength was greater than the Kid's. He tore free, disregarding the pain from his ear, got his right elbow in the Kid's stomach and forced their bodies apart to free his arm.

He took another cut in the shoulder as he did so, but managed to get a grip on the knife wrist. He twisted it backward, trying to force the Kid to drop the knife.

The Pecos Kid hung on grimly, beating Andy about the head with his splinted hand. The crew had gathered around the fighters in a semi-circle, but no one save the cook made any attempt to interfere. He stepped in once but Monte Gordon dragged him back.

"Let them fight."

The cook stared at him hotly, but he was an old man. He knew it, and he lowered his eyes, hating Gordon and hating himself.

NOW ANDY was conscious of nothing but his striving to keep the Pecos Kid from plunging the butcher knife into his side. The sharp edge of the wooden splint cut his forehead and blood ran down into his eyes.

He twisted harder on the arm, trying to force the Kid to release his grip, but he could not get enough leverage. He turned, sitting up, bringing the arm around in front of him, but the Kid twisted also, rolling over, somehow pulling the wrist from Andy's grasp and coming to his knees.

Andy came upright also, and for an instant they rested there, both on their knees, facing each other. Then the Kid threw himself forward, thrusting with the knife as if it had been a short sword.

Andy turned, avoiding the thrust. The Kid, overbalanced, fell heavily on his face. He rolled to his back, the knife sticking upright, holding Andy away, and came up again. But this time Andy was ready.

He caught the injured wrist in both his

hands, rose, twisting as he did so and using the Kid's arm as a lever, threw the Kid clear over his head.

The Kid fell, his knife hand tucked under him, but none of the watchers knew that the knife had been driven into his breast by the weight of his fall, until he failed to stir.

Andy looked around, and as he did so the old cook took a step forward and thrust a gun into his hand. He stared at it stupidly for an instant as if he had never seen a gun before, then he straightened and stirred the Kid's limp body with his toe.

"Get up."

The Kid failed to move. Andy was about to kick him when something in the way the Kid's body lay caught his attention. He hesitated for an instant, then took a half a step backward. "Turn him over," he commanded.

Tex Hart obeyed. They all saw the handle of the knife sticking out from the left breast, its broad blade entirely embedded in the Kid.

"Is he dead?"

Hart made a quick examination, then looked up, nodding.

Andy raised his eyes and found himself staring directly at Monte Gordon. He read the hunger in the man's look, and the eagerness.

"You want to make something of it?" He faced Gordon directly, carefully lifting the cook's gun and then dropping it into his empty holster.

Gordon studied him. There was a calculating look on the man's face as if he were carefully weighing his chances. After a moment he shook his head. "Not my fight."

"All right," said Andy, "and don't forget it." He did not take his look from Gordon but he spoke to the cook.

"What about Bill?"

The cook was almost crying. "I shouldn't have left that rifle where that snake could reach it. I shouldn't. I shouldn't have left it around—"

He was interrupted by a voice from the trampled ground. "Stop that caterwauling and give me a hand."

THEY ALL turned in surprise. For some reason everyone around the wagon had assumed that because he had not gotten up, Bill Drake was dead.

He had twisted his heavy body now and was trying to get his knees under him. He did not succeed until Andy and the cook came to his assistance, and then he stood shakily on his feet, grasping the wagon for support with his right hand. His left shoulder had been shattered by the heavy rifle ball.

Andy steadied him while the cook dragged out a box for a seat and the others crowded around. Surprisingly, Mary Thorne stepped in then. Her face was very white and her eyes looked enormous, but her voice was steady and so were her hands as she helped Andy strip off his brother's jacket and blood-soaked shirt.

The heavy slug had pretty well smashed up the shoulder. It was a bruised, gaping hole, and Bill Drake had lost a lot of blood.

To Andy he looked very bad, and he said tensely, "We'd better turn and try and get him over to the army doctor at Fort Grant."

"No you don't." Bill's voice was weak, but as positive as ever. "Get me to the fort and they'd find a reason for putting a rope collar around my neck. Patch it up the best you can and throw me in the wagon. I've had worse and pulled through."

Mary Thorne had been examining the wound. "You're a fool," she told him tensely. "Do you want to die?"

The mocking light showed for an instant in Bill's eyes. "Wouldn't that suit you? Isn't that what you've been working for?"

She refused to meet his eyes. Instead she had the cook bring a clean shirt which he had been saving carefully at the bottom of his box. It was, he said, his burying shirt.

Mary Thorne paid no attention to his protests. She tore the shirt into rough strips and fashioned a crude bandage. It was full daylight before Bill had been placed in the wagon, the other wounded patched up, and the Pecos Kid's body covered by a small cairn of heaped stones.

Then they rode on, a silent company, each buried deeply in his own thoughts, his;

own fears. The crew as a whole missed Bill's leadership. They were accustomed to his decisions, to his orders, his whims.

Now that he rode within the chuckwagon they felt lost, a body without a head. Many of them who had cursed him deeply in the past, who would have turned on him had they dared, now worried for fear that he would not recover.

EVEN MARY missed him, riding at the head of the column. There had been a sense of security in seeing his rock-like figure ahead of her, even when she had feared him.

She tried to say as much to Andy as they rode forward. It was curious how hard it was for her to talk with the younger Drake. At first it had been easy. She had recognized in him something of her own spirit, and beside the other outlaws he had seemed friendly and concerned.

But somehow he had changed in the last twenty-four hours. He was more silent and there was a certain grim purpose about him which she had not noticed before. He was, she thought as she glanced at him in the warming morning light, a great deal like his older brother, not as ruthless, not as cold, but as purposeful.

"I'm sorry about Bill," she said.

She tried to make her tone meek. She knew that he blamed her at least in part for what had happened, and at the moment she was willing to take part of the blame.

Andy turned his head. They were riding beside the wagon while Monte Gordon and Tex Hart rode at the head of the column. Of all the crew, Monte Gordon regretted Bill Drake's hurt least, and he was, by the mere act of riding out at the head of the crew, asserting his claim to their leadership.

Mary Thorne had expected that Andy would dispute this with Gordon, but Andy had given no indication that he was even conscious of what the man was about. He looked the girl over carefully now and his expression showed that he did not believe her.

"Are you?"

She flushed, striving to crowd down her rising temper. Why was it that neither Andy nor she could speak to each other without getting into an argument?

"I am," she told him, biting off her words. "And I'm perfectly selfish about it. I'm afraid of this country. I'm more afraid of it than I was of your brother. I'm afraid of the Indians and that we won't be able to find the gold and that we may die of thirst before we get out. I don't trust Monte Gordon to lead us. I think he's a fool."

"You should have thought of that yesterday before you made up to him."

She still fought to control her voice. "And you should not have told me what you did."

"Oh, so it's my fault."

"Look," she was still desperately trying to ride down her temper, "we're acting like a couple of kids. This is not the time for us to quarrel. Can't we both say that we've made some mistakes and forget it?"

His eyes did not soften as he looked at her. "Bill warned me never to try and guess what a woman was up to. What are you up to, Bantam? You've got what you wanted. Gordon is riding at the head of the crew. Isn't that what you were planning, or have you changed your mind. Have you made a deal with Monte Gordon, one that you are afraid you might have to keep?"

Had she been close enough she would have struck him across the face. He had so nearly guessed her exact thoughts.

"All right." Her voice was cold now, almost deadly "You're right. I did make a deal with Monte Gordon. You suggested that I pick one man and cling to him, but let me tell you something, Mr. Andrew Drake, I'm not the kind of person who clings to anyone. I stand on my own feet and I fight.

"Unfortunately I haven't the weight and the muscles to stand up and swing with a man. I have to use my head, and I used it as best I could. I figured that no one man would protect me, that no one man was big enough to stand against the crew, so I started out to make every one of you work for me, to turn you all on my side."

He looked at her, not quite understanding, and she laughed at him.

"Men," she said, and the word on her lips was like an oath. "Stupid, egotistical men. There was never a time when one smart woman wasn't the equal of a dozen men. And you, you ride here quietly and let Monte Gordon take over the crew. Why aren't you up in front? Why aren't you fighting for your rights?"

He looked at her for a long moment in silence, then his tight face muscles loosened a little, but he did not smile.

"You are a spitfire, aren't you, Bantam? Well, you may be as smart as you say, but I doubt it. If you were you'd know why I ride back here. Bill's hurt. He's hurt because he took over a fight which should have been mine. And Gordon and his friends are planning to take over. To do that, they have to get Bill.

"As long as he is alive some of the crew will side with him. I mean to see that he stays alive. Let Monte Gordon think that he's won. Let him ride at the head of the column and feed his vanity. This game isn't finished yet. Gordon will never lead this crew until he's killed me."

MONTE GORDON did not halt the men until the sun had already dropped behind the western mountains. All during the heat of the day they plodded onward. The sun, a ball of burning flame in the almost cloudless sky, beat down upon them without relief or mercy.

And all day long the smoke signals raised their mushrooming heads toward the sky. At the brief noon halt there was some grumbling among the men which Gordon chose to ignore. Instead he walked over to the wagon and parted the canvas which the cook had closed against the flies.

He had hardly touched the cover before Andy was at his side, moving around the small fire in a dozen quick steps. Gordon heard him coming and turned, a half sneering smile on his lips.

"You want something?"

"Leave Bill alone," Andy said, his tone carrying its warning.

"I wouldn't hurt him for the world," Gordon said. "I just wanted another look at the map."

"I have it."

"You'd better give it to me. As long as Bill's hurt I'm leading the crew."

"Who says so?"

Tex Hart and two other men had moved up behind Gordon, the weight of their presence making itself felt. The rest of the crew watched, not taking sides, neutral until they saw what was going to happen.

"We elected him," said Tex Hart.

"I didn't." It was the cook.

He had stepped to the head of the wagon and lifted down his heavy rifle which he now cradled in his arm. He did not point it at either Hart or the other men, but its warning was clear.

Gordon looked at him. "You'd better be careful who you pick for friends."

The cook spat in the dust. "For seventy years I been picking my friends without help from you. I guess I'll just keep on doing it that way. As for who leads the crew, I'll listen to Bill Drake. He ain't dead yet. There's a gun beside him on that blanket in the wagon and I'll still bet he can shoot better lying down than any of you can standing on your two feet."

THERE was a chuckle from inside the wagon and Andy realized that his brother was awake. He reached back, pulling open the canvas without taking his eyes from Gordon.

"You got visitors," he told Bill.

"So I see." The elder Drake's voice was weak. His face was flushed and his lips cracked, but he managed to lift himself on his good elbow. "What's the matter, Monte? Getting too big for your boots?"

Even with Drake stretched out on his back, Monte Gordon found that he had not lost his awe of the man. He tried to speak confidently.

"You've got the wrong idea, Bill. I'm not trying to take over, but with you laid up, someone has to do the leading."

"Yes, someone." Drake's irony was plain. "When I need someone to take over I'll tell you, Monte."

Gordon looked around, feeling the need of support. The rest of the crew had pressed forward when they heard Bill's voice until

they formed a semi-circle around the wagon's tail-gate. Only Tex Hart and the two other men offered Gordon real help.

Tex Hart said, "Listen, Bill. We're all in this together and you're smashed up. These hills are full of Injuns, and they'll get fuller. The sooner we locate that gold and hightail, the healthier we're all going to be."

"Sure," said Bill Drake.

"So we need someone to lead us. Someone who knows the country and is on his feet."

"Okay, Andy can do it."

Hart took a deep breath. "No he can't," he said resolutely. "I've got nothing against him, but he doesn't know the country and the men won't follow him."

"Meaning that they will follow Monte?"

"Some of us will. I'm warning you, Bill, we don't like the looks of things. There's a lot of smoke in the hills, more than would come from broncos. Some of the other Apaches are out. If you insist on having this kid lead, some of us are riding out, now."

Bill stirred. It was obvious that had he been on his feet he would have beaten Tex Hart. But he wasn't on his feet.

The decision was Andy's, and Andy surprised them all by saying in an even voice, "There's a lot to what he says, Bill. If we don't get together on this, we're never going to find that gold, and the chances are good that we won't get out of the mountains. I've no objections to taking Monte's orders."

EVERYONE in camp turned to look at him, and he read the condemnation in their eyes. He had backed down. In a country where a man never backed down without losing face, he had let Monte Gordon triumph over him.

He saw that Tex Hart was sneering, that the others were exchanging quick glances. He felt his wounded brother's eyes upon him, he saw the disgust in the cook's face, and then looked toward Mary Thorne.

He saw too that she thought he was afraid and a sudden feeling of disgust for all of them rose up through him. They were fools, he thought. It would serve them right if he precipitated the fight which they all seemed to be waiting for, if he split the crew into two factions, if half a dozen of them died.

What would the remaining ones do, turn and run toward Fort Grant, hoping that they reached its safety before the Indians struck?

As long as they remained together they were fairly safe. The Indians knew from bitter experience that there were many smarter things than attacking Drake's well-armed crew. True, they might try another raid on the horses as they had the night before, but that came more under the heading of a nuisance than a real danger.

He had his brother to think of, and the other wounded men, and yes, damn her, the girl. No matter how angry he got with her he could not get Mary Thorne out of his mind.

Monte Gordon interrupted Andy's straying thoughts. Gordon was pressing his advantage, now that he thought Andy had backed down.

"I asked you for the map a while ago. I'll take it now."

Andy used his left hand to draw the folded paper from his shirt. He kept his other hand free, close to his gun.

"I think you're misunderstanding me," he said clearly. "Let's get it straight, Monte, once and for all. I'll follow you if Bill agrees, because we can't afford to split the crew. We'll all have to hang together if we want to live. But I'm not taking any orders from you that don't make sense to me, and I'm not turning this map over to you. I'm giving it back to Bill. When he says that you can look at it, you can."

He reached into the wagon and dropped the paper at his brother's side. He heard his brother laugh and recognized satisfaction in the sound.

"Good boy." Bill had again raised himself on his elbow. "He's right, Monte. We can't afford to fight each other now. Here's the map." He flung it contemptuously from the wagon so that it fell at Gordon's feet. "See if you can read it. See what

luck you have, and when you get lost, come back and talk to me."

Gordon stooped slowly and picked it up. There was hate in the glance that he threw at Andy. For a moment he'd thought that he had cowed the Drakes. Now the crew who were not lined up with him were laughing at him. It was something that he would remember.

He spread the paper on the ground and studied it, and called Tex Hart to his side. Together they traced out the lines and tried to match them with the country ahead and failed. But they refused to admit their failure at once. They waited three days before they asked Bill Drake's advice.

THOSE three days were the most grueling that Mary Thorne could remember. They pressed on toward the peaks which now stood above them, bare and sinister and uninviting. Water was short and twice they camped without finding any, drawing on the casks which were carried at the side of the chuckwagon.

It was a question now of finding the right canyon, and they scouted one after another, each patrol returning more beat out and discouraged.

Then Monte found a spring, and here he established a kind of permanent camp, building up a brush corral for the horses and keeping out regular guards, day and night.

He was convinced that the site of the lost wagon train was somewhere within a fifteen mile radius of the camp and he set about quartering the ground as systematically as he could.

Andy offered no objection. For one thing, the camp offered a chance for Bill to rest. The shoulder was not responding as it should to treatment and his big body was by turns racked by chills, then fever.

And Andy stayed at his side, refusing to join any of the scouting expeditions which rode out each day in a circle, searching the hundred small canyons.

Three times the scouting parties had been ambushed by Indians. They had lost three men and five horses, and the remaining members of the crew were discouraged and

[*Turn page*]


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beat out. At the end of the third day they gathered sullenly around the fire while Gordon and Tex Hart studied the map for the hundredth time.

Bill Drake lay on his wagon bunk and watched them under the shadow of the raised canvas. His fever seemed to have broken and his eyes were clearer than they had been. Andy sensed that his brother was on the mend.

Andy sat on the tail-gate, idly swinging his legs, his eyes on Mary Thorne who sat clear across the fire. The girl seemed to have wilted during the last three days. Perhaps it was the extreme heat, or perhaps the disappointment at having come so close without finding any trace of the lost wagon train.

Tex Hart and Gordon were arguing over the map, their voices rising and falling in the evening air.

The guards were motionless, standing on the high ground, watching the rough country to the northwest.

"I tell you," Hart's voice carried across the camp, "the canyon we're looking for has probably had a cloudburst. We've undoubtedly ridden through it in the last few days and saw no sign. My guess is that we'll never find it, that we'd better get out of here while we can. The grub's getting low and the horses are beat out. If we have any hope of getting back to Tucson we'd better ride."

"Shall I tell them where the train is?" Bill Drake spoke to his brother and his tone seemed almost normal.

Andy turned his head in surprise. He noted that his brother's eyes seemed clearer and that a small smile was touching his bearded lips.

"You mean you know?"

"Sure. You didn't think I came on this crazy chase blindfolded? I was up this way years ago and I found the remains of some burned wagons in a canyon over to the west. The map checks with what I remember."

"How far from here?"

"Maybe five miles. Maybe longer the way you'll have to ride."

"Don't tell them."

"Don't tell us what?" Monte Gordon had risen and moved up behind Andy without being seen.

Bill spoke before Andy could object. "Where the gold is, you fool."

NOW THE crew, which had been lounging about the camp, suddenly came alert. Even Mary Thorne roused from her lethargy and came over toward the wagon.

Gordon was staring at the outlaw leader. Bill had raised himself on his uninjured arm and was looking at them with a touch of mockery.

"None of you ever learn anything." His voice struck at them like the lash of a whip, almost as it had in the days before he was hurt. "You didn't think I came out here to search over a hundred square miles of badlands?"

Gordon was glaring at him. "Why didn't you tell us this sooner?"

Bill looked at him. "Monte," he said, "you were so certain of your ability to lead, so sure that you could step into my place. I wanted the boys to get their bellies full of your leadership."

Gordon flushed darkly and without realizing what he did he let his hand fall toward the holstered gun at his side. Andy shifted at once, dropping to the ground and turning a little so he faced Gordon.

Bill said sharply, "Break it up. Haven't either of you learned any sense yet? We're in enough trouble without fighting now."

Monte Gordon managed to relax. He said quietly. "You've done a lot of talking, supposing you start delivering."

"All right," said Bill, and called the cook. "Get up the team and get ready to move. I can't ride yet, but I can sit on the wagon seat."

They moved at full dark, two riders out as skirmishers before the wagon in case of Indians. Bill was propped up on the seat beside the cook, and Andy rode at the side of the wagon.

He was quite conscious of Mary Thorne who rode beyond him although they had not exchanged a single word during the last two days.

The ride stretched from five to ten to fif-

teen miles. The country was extremely rough, getting worse as they progressed.

Twice Bill ordered them to turn back and retrace part of their steps. Once he had the cook halt the wagon and sat staring at the opening of a small draw which cut off to their right, and then, just as dawn pinked the eastern sky, he gave a sigh of satisfaction and indicated a canyon which wound up toward the rocky crests above.

"This is it."

Andy had reined his horse close in to the front wagon wheel. "You sure?"

"Sure," said Bill.

ANDY TURNED to look at the canyon. The entrance was narrow, not more than fifteen feet above, and the shoulders of rock on either side rose almost straight up forty or fifty feet.

"I don't like it."

"No more do I," Bill said. "Put a man up each side before we pull in."

"How far to where the train was burned?"

"I don't remember exactly. Three, maybe four miles."

"You sure it's the right place?" Andy was frowning up at the rock bulwarks which climbed toward the mountain now showing in the near distance."

"See that boulder?" Bill pointed toward a rock which thrust out from one bank like the blunted prow of a ship. At its top, carved by endless decades of wind, was a rough sculpture of a horse's head.

The morning light, growing with each successive minute, etched it into sharp relief.

"Now look at the map," Bill told him.

Andy had no need to look again at the map. He recalled clearly the cramped writing—*From horsehead rock, four miles north toward the mountain.*

"I remembered the rock," said Bill. "It's the first thing I saw when I looked at the map, and then I recalled that I'd found the remains of some wagons in a canyon above the rock."

Monte Gordon had been sitting, listening, beyond Andy. He stared up at the rock

[*Turn page*]


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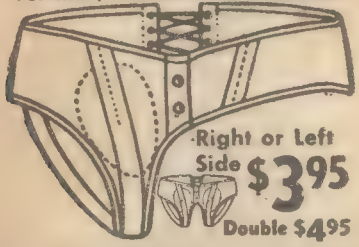

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thoughtfully. "We rode this canyon day before yesterday, but I didn't see the rock."

"In the bright sun you wouldn't notice it," Bill told him. "It's the way the shadows fall in the early morning or late at night that gives it that appearance.

"And we found no trace of wagons."

"Probably buried in the sand. There wasn't much left from the fire. Some wheel rims and some pieces of iron. Get a man up on top on each ridge before we turn in. It's pretty narrow."

Monte turned and gave the order and the guards fanned out. Not until they appeared at the top of the flanking ridges and waved did Bill tell the cook to pull forward.

The canyon was a narrow slot, twisting and turning as it broke a way through the barrier rock. Boulders were strewn along the bottom and a dry creek bed on the right showed marks of old floods which must have filled the canyon with a swirling torrent at least twenty feet deep.

Andy observed them, saying to his brother, "I'd have hated to be caught in here after a heavy rain."

Bill nodded, his eyes on the high water marks. His face looked a little white, strained, with a tight circle around the pressed lips.

Andy noticed it. "You all right?"

His brother nodded, but a quarter of a mile farther he told the cook to stop the wagon. "Think I'll lie down for a little while." They helped him back to the blankets at the rear of the wagon.

THE REST of the crew had moved on ahead, spurred by their thoughts of the gold, but strangely Mary Thorne had lingered. As he turned from making his brother comfortable Andy found her sitting her horse behind the wagon.

"Is he all right?"

"What do you care?" There was bitterness in Andy's voice. "He's led you to your gold."

Her eyes turned dark. Without a word she put spurs to her horse and rushed past the wagon. The cook who had just crawled out stared after her, then he slowly pulled

a piece of twist tobacco from his pocket and worried off a hunk with his few teeth.

"Son," he said, "there goes a fine girl."

"Damn her," Andy told him savagely.

"You got her figured wrong," said the cook. "She's high-strung and willful and used to having her own way. Then, too, she was scared at finding herself in this gang of cutthroats, and who could blame her."

Andy did not want to talk about it. "Get on with your driving, old man."

"I am old," said the cook, "and therefore I look at things differently than you. My juices are dried up and I can think of a woman without desire. Get her by herself. Take her in your arms. Tell her you are sorry for all that has happened."

"It's mostly her fault."

The cook did not deny it. "Fault, what difference does it make whose fault things are? Once they're done, they're done. I'll wager that she is as sorry now about Bill being hurt as we are, but she'll never admit it, not unless you make the first move."

Andy didn't answer. Instead he spurred on up the canyon. The cook stared after him for a long moment, then spat in the sand at his feet, shook his head and turned back toward the wagon.

"You all right, Bill?"

"My shoulder's burning up."

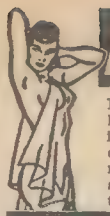
"Shouldn't have tried to ride in the seat." He leaned over and felt the bandage, noting the renewed bleeding. Then as if he realized that there was nothing he could do, he climbed back to the seat.

Andy had disappeared around the next bend of the canyon and the cook felt very much alone. He threw a glance toward the top of the canyon wall on the far side and was relieved to see the outline of the flanker, clear against the sky. But he hurried his horses as if he were certain that the whole Apache nation was closing on him.

The lumbering wagon swung around the curve and far ahead of him he saw a cluster of the crew. Suddenly he heard the wild high shout.

"We've found it. We've found it. Here's a wagon tire!"

*(To be continued in the next issue)*

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— Continued from Other Side

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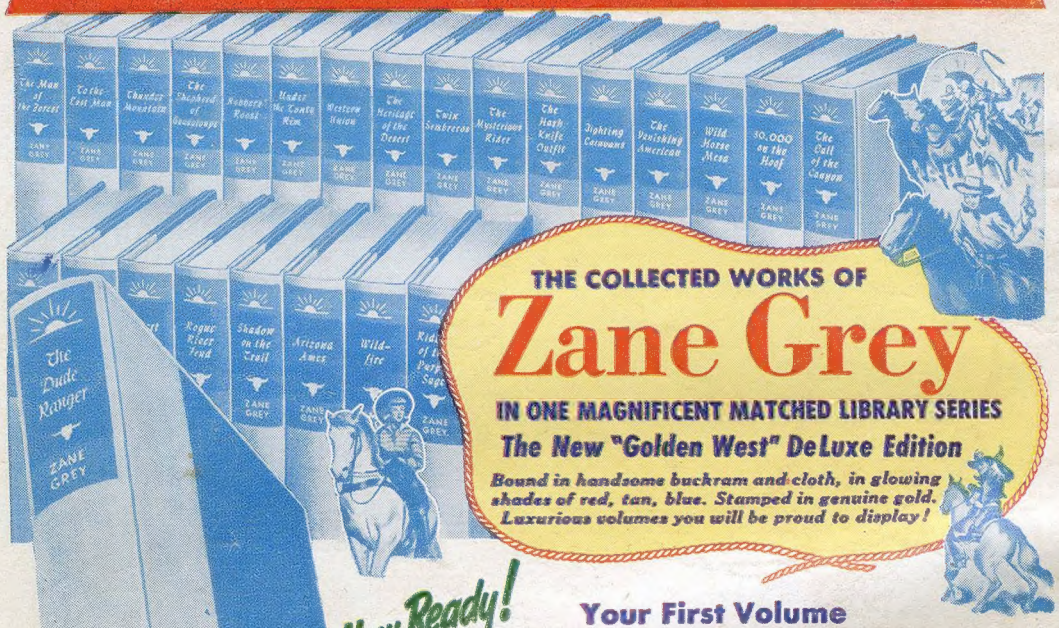


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